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THE STRATEGIC MIND-SET OF THE SOVIET MILITARY: AN ESSAY-REVIEW,(U)
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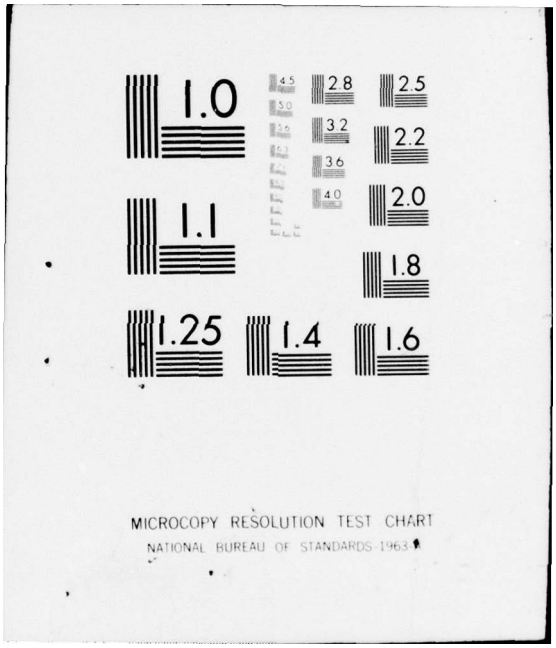
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THE STRATEGIC MIND-SET OF THE SOVIET MILITARY: AN ESSAY-REVIEW

Arnold L. Horelick

February 1977

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(6) THE STRATEGIC MIND-SET OF THE SOVIET MILITARY: AN ESSAY-REVIEW

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A. A. GRECHKO. *The Armed Forces of the Soviet State.* Washington, D. C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 1977. A translation of *Vooruzhennye Sily Sovetskogo gosudarstva*, 2nd expanded edition, Moscow, Voyenizdat, 1975.

V. D. SOKOLOVSKIY. *Soviet Military Strategy.* New York, New York, Crane, Russak & Company, 1975. A translation, edited with analysis and commentary by Harriet Fast Scott, of *Voyennaya strategiya*, 3rd edition, Moscow, Voyenizdat, 1968.

Five years after the first SALT agreements registered the USSR's co-equal status with the United States as a nuclear superpower, the perennial question of Soviet strategic goals has reemerged in a new light as an urgent and highly controversial issue in the West. It is at the heart of the ongoing American defense debate, which is shaped largely by contradictory assumptions about Soviet strategic purposes made by advocates of alternative American policies. Those who believe that the Soviet leadership, at bottom, shares with the United States the objective of stabilizing the Soviet-American strategic relationship at a level of rough equality and regards as futile the quest for any meaningful margin of superiority are prepared to enter into arms limitations agreements with the USSR and to unilaterally exercise restraint in U.S. defense programs that others, making

*An essay-review prepared for publication in the March-April, 1977 issue of *Problems of Communism.*

rather different assumptions about Soviet purposes, reject as endangering American national security and encouraging unhealthy Soviet impulses.

"Hard" evidence bearing on Soviet strategic deployments and new weapons development programs does not, in itself, seem capable of resolving the controversy. For those deeply persuaded that achievement of a nuclear-war-winning capability is precluded by the laws of physics and that "strategic superiority" is therefore a militarily meaningless and politically bankrupt concept, there simply may not be any hard evidence of the kind likely to be acquired that can disprove the USSR's commitment to mutual deterrence. In sharp contrast, now that the USSR is generally credited with having achieved "rough equivalence" in strategic capabilities, those equally persuaded of the ambitious designs of the Soviet leadership can find no satisfactory explanation for the rapid pace and extensive scope of new Soviet strategic programs other than a relentless Soviet drive for strategic superiority--to be employed for purposes of political coercion, if not militarily against the United States or its allies.

Soviet leaders, who presumably know best why they are doing what they are doing, have for the most part been mere bystanders in this American debate over their strategic purposes--bemused, perhaps, but certainly not indifferent, given that U.S. defense budgets hang in the balance. Occasionally, they inject themselves into the debate to assert that their purpose is not aggression, or to reassure the United States that Soviet military preparations serve exclusively peaceful purposes. But they have displayed no inclination to provide in operationally meaningful terms a benign rationale for the military deployments they make and the new strategic arms they are acquiring. In this connection, it might be recalled that one of the early American hopes with respect to the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) was that these negotiations would provide a forum in which the strategic rationales underlying the behavior of the two sides would first be illuminated and then, by mutual adjustment, reconciled to serve the common objective of stabilizing the strategic competition along Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) lines. But the Soviet side manifested no interest in such a strategic dialogue, and at an early stage the negotiations moved into bargaining over specific measures of limitation and

constraint, with the U.S. side obliged to guess at the larger strategic purposes which its negotiating partner sought to achieve.

Given the absence of direct evidence regarding Soviet strategic goals, it is remarkable how negligible a role Soviet military literature has played in the U.S. debate, especially since this literature is the one available source in which Soviet strategic purposes are set forth with some measure of systematic articulation. There are two reasons for this relative neglect, one superficial and the other quite profound. The superficial reason is that until recently very little of this voluminous literature has been available in English translation; it has therefore been accessible only to those who read Russian--in short to only a small part of the American defense-intellectual and arms-control communities. More important, to the limited extent that this material has been brought to bear in the debate, the same kinds of mutually contradictory strategic world views that have made "hard" evidence seem inconclusive have also produced utterly irreconcilable interpretations of the military literature. The optimistic school that inclines to a more benign view of Soviet strategic purposes tends either to ignore this material as irrelevant or to discount it as morale-building Soviet military propaganda and special pleading by the Soviet military establishment for bigger budgets. That is, the goal of "superiority" and the commitment to "victory" repeatedly proclaimed in this literature are dismissed as Soviet military pie-in-the-sky, comparable in operational significance to the party ideologues' harping on the ultimate objective of building communism and creating the new Soviet man. The pessimists, on the other hand, tend to accept this material at face value and to employ it selectively, attaching cardinal importance to its most belligerent and strategically ambitious passages and imparting to them latent operational meaning that goes substantially beyond their manifest content. Seldom is the middle ground between these two positions explored.

For reasons all too well known to students of Soviet affairs, there are great difficulties in attempting to interpret Soviet military literature, and inferences derived from it are bound to be controversial. But to discount it as irrelevant is even less justified than to read it uncritically. Allowing even for the high propaganda load and low hard-data

content of Soviet military pronouncements, surely what Soviet marshals have to say about the USSR's strategic goals should be at least as relevant to the debate as what American officers and defense officials say about those of the United States. While marshaling the evidence would take us far beyond the scope of the present article, the case that Soviet military professionals exercise far greater influence than their American counterparts in shaping their nation's strategic programs and arms control policies seems overwhelmingly powerful to the reviewer. Certainly, in the USSR the military professionals enjoy a virtual monopoly in public exposition of military strategy; in the United States that function is not only shared with but also clearly dominated by civilians.

To the extent that inaccessibility has in the past limited utilization of Soviet professional military writings by Western analysts, that constraint is fast being relaxed thanks to the appearance of competent translations of major Soviet military works, such as the volumes under review. The book by the late Marshal of the Soviet Union A. A. Grechko, who was at the time of his death last year both a full member of the Soviet Communist Party's Politburo and USSR Minister of Defense, is the 12th in the *Soviet Military Thought* translations series published since 1974 under the auspices of the U.S. Air Force. The translation is from the second (1975) Russian edition, with certain slight revisions (introduced under unusual circumstances to be described below). The second volume under review is a new translation, with analysis and commentaries, by Harriet Fast Scott of the third edition of what still stands as the most comprehensive Soviet treatise on military strategy. Written by a group of leading Soviet military academicians under the supervision of the late Marshal V. D. Sokolovskiy, Chief of the Soviet General Staff from 1953 to 1960, *Military Strategy* was first published in the USSR in 1962. As the first Soviet work of its kind to appear in almost four decades, the Sokolovskiy volume attracted wide attention in the West and was published in two independent translations in the United States, each accompanied by analytical introductions and annotations written by distinguished American students of Soviet military affairs.* A second

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*V. D. Sokolovskii, *Soviet Military Strategy*, with analytical introduction and annotations by H. S. Dinerstein, L. Goure, and Thomas W. Wolfe,

revised Russian edition appeared a year later, and still a third, again revised, in 1968. By carefully identifying additions to and deletions from the Sokolovskiy volume as it passed through successive editions, Mrs. Scott in effect has given readers access to all three editions under a single cover.

The books are dissimilar in scope and purpose. Strategy is the central concern of the Sokolovskiy opus but is only one of many issues treated in Marshal Grechko's more modest but wide-ranging book on Soviet "military construction" (*voyennoye stroitel'stvo*). Aimed at a larger, less specialized audience than Sokolovskiy's treatise, the late Soviet Defense Minister's book contains a great deal of popular historical and party-political material and is written in the turgid prose style that is a hallmark of the genre. For the uninitiated Western reader, the ratio of pot-boiler to strategic substance in the Grechko translation will therefore seem distressingly high.

These books will be of interest on two rather different levels of analysis for two classes of foreign readers. For the specialist in Soviet military affairs, the volumes offer an opportunity to explore in minute detail changes in authoritative Soviet military views on a broad range of subjects (e.g., the role of conventional forces, the probability of conventional war escalating to nuclear war, service roles and missions, the external functions of the Soviet armed forces, and perceptions of the opponent) as they have been affected by the shifting U.S.-Soviet strategic balance, the explosive growth of Soviet strategic nuclear capabilities, and new advances in military technology during the 13-year time span bracketed by the first edition of Sokolovskiy and the last edition of Grechko. The organization of this latest translation of Sokolovskiy makes it particularly convenient for precisely this kind of microanalysis, though more assistance from the American editor would have been helpful. While Mrs. Scott provides brief introductory comments to each chapter, identifying a few major changes, the analytical content is disappointingly thin. The editor's overall introduction, useful as a guide to Soviet military literature and to the military and academic institutions in which they are produced, is

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Englewood-Cliffs, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, 1963; and V. D. Sokolovsky, *Military Strategy: Soviet Doctrine and Concepts*, with an introduction by Raymond L. Garthoff, New York, New York, Praeger, 1963.

also weak in analytical substance and does not contribute much to updating the more extensive introductions to the two translations of the first edition written by Herbert Dinerstein, Leon Goure, and Thomas Wolfe and by Raymond Garthoff.

Since few readers of the Grechko translation are likely to take the trouble to compare it with the two earlier Russian-language editions, the reviewer has dutifully done so. This involves two stages: the first, a comparison of the translation (or, in effect the second Russian edition) with the first Russian edition; the second, a comparison of the "revised" translation with the original second, Russian edition.

The second Russian edition (signed to press in March 1975) is somewhat more belligerent in tone than the first (April 1974), expressing deeper reservations about the durability of the improved international situation, and stronger warnings about the changeless aggressive character of the imperialist opponent. Marshal Grechko's considerably expanded discussion of the multinational character of the Soviet armed forces in the later edition is of particular interest, less for its manifest content than for broader concerns that may underlie the disproportionate attention devoted to the subject. Given the kinds of ethnodemographic changes now underway in the USSR, the Soviet armed forces will in the years ahead be obliged to draw on progressively larger numbers of non-European conscripts--primarily from Central Asia and the Caucausus--if they are to remain at their present size. The language, technical skills, training, and morale problems associated with what is privately referred to in Soviet military circles as the "yellowing" (*ozheltenive*) of the Soviet armed forces may require major organizational adjustments. It is clear from Marshal Grechko's historical survey that one adjustment he would strongly have opposed is formation of territorial units comprised of local-nationality conscripts, such as existed in the Soviet Union during most of its history prior to the end of World War II. In proposing a one-third reduction in the size of the Soviet armed forces, Khrushchev had hinted in January 1960 that reorganization of the forces on a territorial basis--inevitably along ethnic lines in many national republics--was under

consideration.* The hint, like many other "hare-brained schemes" of the late First Secretary, was never publicly developed into a proposal; however, Grechko's pointed critique of the military disadvantages of national units (p. 117) suggests that the idea may still find favor in some quarters, particularly in light of the economy's competing claims for the dwindling numbers of new European workers entering the Soviet labor force.

The USAF translation, as the American editor notes in his Introduction, is a "slightly revised version of the Soviet 2nd edition," the revisions having been suggested by the Soviet All-Union Copyright Agency (VAAP), from which the required copyright release was obtained. According to VAAP, Marshal Grechko continued to work on his book during the last period of his life, and the changes incorporated into the American edition correspond to the author's final wording. While relatively few in number--totaling some two pages of text--they suggest some Soviet sensitivity regarding what American readers might infer from certain passages in the Russian edition. Several of the changes requested by VAAP were evidently intended to soften somewhat the belligerent tone of the original.

Particularly noteworthy is the excision of some passages calling for a vigorous Soviet program of military research and development, including the orientation of basic research toward discovery of "still unknown attributes of matter, phenomena, and the laws of nature" that might have military application. On page 193 of the second Russian edition, we read:

> First of all, a uniform military-technological policy is called upon to ensure the preferential development of those trends in scientific-technological progress in the military field which are capable of most fully and comprehensively solving the USSR's growing defense needs for effective means of conduct of modern combat operations. *Along with the resolution of current problems, it orients scientific-technological cadres on the development of various long-term problems, the result of which may find broad application in future military affairs. Of particular importance is basic research aimed at discovering still unknown attributes of matter, phenomena, and the laws of nature, and developing new methods for their study and use to reinforce the state's defense capabilities.* (Emphasis added)

**Pravda* (Moscow), January 15, 1960.

On page 152 of the American edition the passage in italics has been replaced by sentences that convey a strikingly different thrust:

> At the same time our party and the Soviet state consider that one of the major tasks (and it was once again stressed in the materials of the 25th Congress of the CPSU) is the struggle to ban new kinds and systems of weapons of mass destruction. This is an important aim of military detente.

A particularly strident passage from page 7 of Marshal Grechko's Introduction has also been rewritten, perhaps because the original version rather sternly suggests that only unilateral arms efforts by the USSR--rather than negotiated mutual arms limitations--can secure deterrence of general war. The original version read:

> ...the aggressive nature of imperialism has not changed and as long as it exists, the threat of a new world war also persists. *And there is no other guarantee in the world against its outbreak than strengthening the economic and defense might of the USSR and of all the states of the socialist community and raising the combat power of the Soviet Armed Forces and of other fraternal armies.* (Emphasis added)

In the American edition (p. 4), the passage in italics is replaced by a softer statement that does not explicitly preclude "other guarantees." Also excised from the American edition is a passage on page 115 in the civil defense section of the second Russian edition calling for "the systematic conduct of specialized exercises and practices which must be just as organized and planned in character as training in the army and navy."

In a rather different vein, VAAP apparently requested deletion (on page 195 of the second Russian edition) of an unusually specific passage from the section on prospects for future arms development calling for research to increase the sea endurance and diving depth of Soviet missile-launching nuclear submarines and to reduce their noise and radiation levels. The excision suggests Soviet reluctance to provide gratuitous confirmation for foreign readers of what are widely known to be deficiencies

in the performance of Soviet nuclear submarines.

Since lead-times in book publication are long, updating has its perils as well. Two new anti-Chinese passages introduced in the version approved for the American edition (pp. 85, 347)--presumably in 1976, but before the death of Mao Tse-tung--are probably now regretted by Marshal Grechko's heirs and the Soviet military publishing house on whose behalf VAAP claimed to be acting.

While the minutiae of Soviet text revision provide grist for the mill of Kremlinologists, yielding microscopic evidence of potentially significant changes in Soviet military affairs, for general readers the volumes under review are recommended primarily for the macroanalytical insights they offer into Soviet strategic policy. What is striking in this respect about both books--and about Soviet military literature generally--is the evidence they provide not of change but of continuity over the last decade and a half in basic attitudes toward nuclear war and policies to prepare for it. These attitudes appear to be fundamental elements in the belief system of the Soviet military and have been little affected by the appearance of new military technologies and alterations in the global military balance of power.

Entering the realm of Soviet military discourse, the uninitiated Western reader, whose own strategic mind-set has been formed by the highly sophisticated, technically elegant, and politically dispassionate Western theoretical literature, will find himself in an entirely different strategic universe. By comparison the Soviet approach will seem simplistic, crude, and highly partisan. Indeed, it will seem terribly old-fashioned and strangely inappropriate for the nuclear age. It is the Soviet focus on *fighting* nuclear war and acquiring weapons and training forces to wage it that will seem most strangely out of phase to the Western reader, accustomed to thinking about nuclear conflict exclusively as a contingency to be deterred.

This focus on war-fighting is by no means inconsistent with deterrence of the enemy in the system of Soviet strategic thought. Unlike the sharp, often dogmatic distinction made between the two in Western analysis, deterrence of the opponent is subsumed under acquisition of superior war-fighting capabilities in the Soviet view. Similarly, no crisp distinction

is drawn in Soviet military doctrine between countervalue and counterforce targets and strategies, i.e., the enemy's industrial-administrative centers and his strategic offensive weapons alike are invariably included in a single integrated target system, the destruction of which must be promptly executed "by crushing nuclear blows...if [the enemy] forces the socialist countries to this" (pp. 289-291 of the Scott translation of Sokolovskiy).

This straightforward war-fighting approach to nuclear strategy does not necessarily imply a confident belief that "victory" in nuclear war is feasible (although the goal is repeatedly proclaimed), but it reflects a strong conviction that, whatever costs nuclear war might entail, strategic planning must be oriented toward prevailing in it, should it occur--not at carrying out one side of a mutual suicide pact with a perfidious enemy. Even if general nuclear war under all foreseeable circumstances is perceived as catastrophic and deterrence of such a war is the overriding purpose of Soviet strategic exertions, a sensible policy in the Soviet view must attempt to provide the offensive and defensive ingredients for conducting such a war, maximizing chances of national survival and securing the best possible outcome.

How this "unsophisticated" Soviet approach to nuclear-war-fighting affects Soviet strategic policy may perhaps be delineated most sharply by comparing the main features of Soviet and U.S. strategic behavior. Since the mid-1960s, it has been consistent U.S. national policy--if not always the practice in every detail of implementation--to favor programs that enhance American confidence in maintaining an "assured destruction" capability. The U.S. has deliberately eschewed programs that offer serious prospects of attaining superiority via development of counterforce and damage-limiting capabilities. The possibility of achieving marginal advantages in such capabilities has evoked no enthusiasm, and the United States has concluded that against a determined and powerful opponent like the Soviet Union, a major effort to achieve clear-cut superiority would be unavailing, at best needlessly expensive and at worst dangerously provocative and destabilizing. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, appears deliberately to have chosen a course that leaves open the possibility of various forms of superiority, even if only marginal; it seems prepared to continue to work

away at all of the operational problems of war-fighting, even in the absence of any assurance that they can be resolved satisfactorily, and it has displayed no unilateral willingness to halt at a specified "end point." While such an orientation seems oddly at variance with American understanding of the logic of nuclear strategy, it is quite compatible not only with the war-fighting focus of Soviet strategic thought but also with the broader Soviet understanding of military competition as but one form of the long-term global political conflict that will endure so long as social systems inherently hostile to the USSR exist in powerful states.

Whether this war-fighting focus of Soviet strategic doctrine is intrinsically malevolent in purpose is a moot question. Certainly, the moral and ethical superiority of a doctrine that attaches strategic virtue to weapons for killing the enemy's unprotected people, while condemning weapons capable of disabling his protected means of mass destruction, is not self-evident.

But with respect to the prospects for finding some stable equilibrating mechanisms by which to manage the U.S.-Soviet strategic relationship, the divergent American and Soviet strategic mind-sets present a formidable barrier. As implied by Marshal Grechko's assertion that reliable deterrence can be provided only by strengthening Soviet military capabilities, arms control does not rank high in Soviet strategic thought as a means for safeguarding the security interests of the USSR. The reader will find not a single reference in the Grechko translation to the ABM treaty or to the interim U.S.-Soviet agreement on limiting strategic offensive weapons, much less any suggestion that the USSR must unilaterally exercise restraint in its military programs in the interests of facilitating future arms control agreements. (In this respect, as in most others, the Grechko book is not atypical of Soviet military literature as a whole.) One looks in vain for evidence in Soviet pronouncements of sensitivity to the insecurity of others that the Soviet Union's own security programs may promote. On the contrary, the USSR's security tends to be viewed as synonymous with the insecurity of the potential enemy; indeed, the latter is expected to behave more "reasonably" only when the correlation of forces shifts in his disfavor.

In American strategic thought, the MAD standoff appears as the least miserable alternative in a dangerous world--a reasonable, if not altogether palatable, contract of mutually shared liability; in Soviet strategic thinking, it is an unconscionable mortgaging of the future to one's enemies. Unfortunately, the gap separating these two outlooks is less likely the consequence of a temporary "lag" in Soviet strategic sophistication than of profound differences between the political cultures of the two societies.