Reading Between the Lines: Methods of Analysis of Soviet Military Literature

STATUTORILY EXEMPT

The writings of Soviet military authors often say more than the obvious.

SOVIET SECRECY: THE PROBLEM

Probably since the first hieroglyphics were inked onto papyrus, military authors have been beset by a fundamentally unresolvable conflict. On the one hand, propaganda and indoctrination ask that military information be spread widely to persuade and instruct. On the other hand, security demands strict controls on the spread of that same information to protect what are deemed vital state secrets.

The Soviets, well aware of the problem, prefer to stress security. That presents a dilemma to Soviet officers, especially those with sensitive areas of expertise, who wish to advance their careers by publishing books or articles. Their only outlet for getting into print is the Soviet military press, a state monopoly run mostly by the Military Publishing House (*Voenizdat*) of the USSR Ministry of Defense, not an inviting medium for making startling new revelations about the Soviet armed forces.

In spite of the restrictions, there are few if any subjects of a military nature that are taboo per se. However, when treating sensitive topics such as the latest weapons technology or recent military developments, prospective authors face an almost impenetrable wall of censorship should their writing address Soviet issues. Instead, most take the easy way. They either write about a given topic as covered by the Western military press, or they trace its historical roots, most often turning to the experience of World War II.

Ironically, when writing about Western armed forces, Soviets almost never identify weaknesses in tactics or technology. On the surface they seem to have an almost naive regard for Western ingenuity and know-how, limiting verbal attacks against opposing armed forces mostly to lambasting political motives. Soviet prowess in World War II gets similar one-sided praise; rarely do the Nazis receive adequate credit for their successes in battle. (After all, they did come out the losers.)

The Soviets are particularly touchy about some areas. The paucity of literature on signals intelligence (Sigint) and radioelectronic combat (REC) (a rough Soviet equivalent to the Western concept of electronic warfare [EW]), two subjects on which this author did a thorough study recently, proved to be a case in point. Basically, current Soviet capabilities and developmental trends touching on any "hot topic" rarely get direct treatment. Such barriers present a formidable challenge for a researcher using Soviet literature as his primary source.

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There is hope, though. A few simple approaches can penetrate some of the fog of secrecy. All they require is thorough access to available materials – in most cases, Soviet magazines, newspapers, and books – and careful plodding in search of significant details. That, of course, is the essence of any type of research which probes into areas where information has been deliberately obscured or withheld.

Trends in Terminology

The Soviet armed forces take great care in formulating and using military terminology. This writer knows of no nation which publishes more comprehensive official documents codifying the military lexicon than the USSR. The most recent and best examples of this phenomenon are the *Soviet Military Encyclopedia*, completed in 1980, and its condensed and updated successor, the *Military Encyclopedic Dictionary*, issued in 1983.[1] Marshal of the Soviet Union N. V. Ogarkov, then Chief of the General Staff, served as the chairman of the prestigious Main Editorial Commission which oversaw both publishing efforts. The Commission comprised almost the entire high command of the Soviet armed forces.

Given such high level oversight, it follows that new terminology cannot be adopted for general use in the Soviet military without official approval. Since Soviet military terminology does not gratify the whims of a buzzword cycle, it can be very helpful, and sometimes crucial, in tracing the development of new policies, technology, and tactics.

One excellent example came from analysis of a new Soviet concept in force employment called the operational maneuver group (OMG). In a thorough examination of the OMG, two Department of Defense analysts, both with intelligence backgrounds, could find but a single occurrence – in a Polish military journal – of the term "operational maneuver group" in any Warsaw Pact publication.[2] Yet they deemed the article and its new wording so important that it served as the key piece of evidence in their portrait of this new Soviet operational development. Assuming the Polish term for the OMG to be Soviet in origin, they went so far as to suggest the probable Russian language equivalent. While new terms appeared less rarely with the advent of REC than with that of the OMG, they gave equally significant signals that something new and important was afoot.

1. N. V. Ogarkov, ed., *Soviet Military Encyclopedia (Sovetskaya voyennaya entsiklopediya)*, 8 vols. (Moscow: Military Publishing House, 1976–80), p. 1; N. V. Ogarkov, ed., *Military Encyclopedic Dictionary (Voyennyy entsiklopedicheskiy slovar')* (Moscow: Military Publishing House, 1983), p. 1.
2. John G. Hines and Phillip A. Petersen, "The Soviet Conventional Offensive in Europe," *Military Review*, April 1984, p. 9.

Finding Truth in Exaggeration

So often do the Soviets engage in exaggerated rhetoric, or worse, that a neophyte reader of their literature can have difficulty knowing what to take seriously. Although technical articles in the military press tend to escape some of the hyperbole, no genre in Soviet literature is exempted entirely.

Context combined with a basic knowledge of the facts provides the best way to discover the meaning underlying an exaggeration. In two related articles in different publications, a Soviet major, purportedly quoting from *Armed Forces Journal*, stated that the new U.S. "Deep Strike" strategy had as its "main goal the waging of electronic warfare against the Socialist countries."[3] Not only is his claim about "Deep Strike" only partially true (the concept's primary aim is to concentrate attacks against an enemy's second echelon forces, employing several elements, including electronic warfare), but also a rather thorough search of *Armed Forces Journal* yielded no firm basis for the Soviet's reference.[4] Exaggerations like this lead to at least one logical assumption: that the author, and the superior officers who authorized publication of his articles, view radio-electronic combat as the glue that holds modern, fast-moving, far-ranging warfare together. If the assumption is correct, their opinion on the importance of REC inadvertently infiltrated into what might otherwise have been a fairly accurate assessment of a new Western military strategy.

Ideology: Words with Various Interpretations

Paying ideological homage is a way of life for writers in the Soviet Union. Much of the tribute they pay for the privilege of getting their work published is purely perfunctory. Of course, some ideology, written by Communist true believers, can be taken at face value. Then there is an in-between area of ideological rhetoric, seemingly superficial at first glance, that carries a significant secondary message, either intentionally or unintentionally.

Consider the typical way in which the Soviet military press covers Western military hardware. Respect for the technology must be balanced by verbal attacks on the "imperialist" motives for creating and employing such weaponry. The virulence of the attacks on a particular weapons system can serve as a rough measure of how seriously the Soviets view its threat.

In the field of electronic warfare (EW), the Soviets have singled out the EF-111A Raven for particularly heavy ideological criticism. In an article which appeared years before its actual deployment, the new U.S. electronic countermeasures (ECM) aircraft bore the brunt of a verbal barrage. The article accused

3. V. Roshchupkin, "NATO's Winged Spies *(Krylatyye Shpiony NATO)*," *Aviation and Cosmonautics (Aviatsiya i kosmonavtika)*, No. 7, 1983, p. 46; V. Roshchupkin, "Washington's Spy Nests *(Shpionskiye gnezda Vashingtona)*," *Radio*, No. 5, 1983, p. 56.
4. Articles in the Soviet military press commonly cite "the foreign press" or a certain publication as sources but seldom specify a particular magazine issue.

the Pentagon and NATO of planning to use their new "playthings" for initiating "offensive actions . . . against the Warsaw Pact countries."[5] Thus, by their multiple ideological rumblings, the Soviets have branded the EF-111A as a particularly dangerous new threat they must counter.

Translations and Other Uses of Language

Language can either throw up barriers or pave the way to understanding. This article has already considered one limited use of language, terminology, as a finite set of fixed expressions. The scope can also be widened for a look at the entire spectrum of word usage.

In the broadest sense, all researchers must grapple with linguistic nuances to obtain the data they are seeking. More specifically, however, there are certain uses of language which can be exploited in their own right, regardless of the basic meaning being conveyed, to discover interesting facts about the user.

Translation from one language into another presents a specific case where meaning can be either obscured or clarified, depending on the circumstances. Glaring and embarrassing errors in translation, such as Jimmy Carter's English "love" for the people of Poland turning into "carnal desire" with interpretation into Polish, make great reading in newspapers. They merit no further attention for practical study of Soviet military literature. Instead, greater profit can be gained by exploiting the helpful clues to be found in Soviet translations, especially those from English to Russian.

Words chosen for translation, and those omitted, can tell a great deal about the state of an author's knowledge and mental processes. For instance, this author, while gaining some valuable new knowledge, got much less than he expected from a recently published Soviet dictionary on military electronic terminology.[6] Instead, what the dictionary contained were a number of significant omissions and a hodgepodge of entries of doubtful validity. It omitted *avionics*, a contraction for *aviation electronics* in common usage in American aviation publications for a generation or more. The closest equivalent for the term in the dictionary was an entry for *aerospace electronics*. Then it devoted seven pages to mostly useless word associations with *device*, such as *lasing device* (i.e., a laser). Taken at face value, the work shows that some Soviets who should be better informed demonstrate a serious lack of understanding of an important sector of Western technical terminology. At the same time, the book proved its worth by showing how firmly entrenched the new vocabulary associated with radioelectronic combat has become.

5. M. Ponomarev, "'Playthings' of the Pentagon (*'Igrushki' Pentagona*)," *Red Star (Krasnaya zvezda)* [Moscow], 18 July 1979, p. 3, cols. 1–2.
6. Nikolay Nikolaevich Novichkov and German Semenovich Pimenov, *English-Russian Military Dictionary of Radioelectronics, Laser, and Infrared Engineering* (Moscow: Military Publishing House, 1984).

Turning to a more specific application, translation analysis can aid in detecting the birth of new Soviet combat concepts. Until the end of 1982 or later, the definition of the new U.S. Precision Location Strike System (PLSS) was rendered quite literally as a "system for precisely determining the location of and for accomplishing strikes against radar emitters."[7] But in late 1983 a Soviet colonel called the PLSS (and also the Assault Breaker) a "reconnaissance strike system *(razvedyvatel'nyy udarnyy kompleks)*."[8] The new translation seems to have stuck, having appeared in several more articles in 1984.

It is logical to assume, on the basis of numerous precedents, that the Soviets have now adopted a new concept, named the reconnaissance strike system, which has many similarities to the PLSS and Assault Breaker. The Soviets tend to translate literally words for which they have no counterpart, but they translate with equivalents wherever they feel that their own terminology applies to a Western idea. The common translation of the U.S. title "Secretary of Defense" as "Minister of Defense" exemplifies the latter tendency.

Other traits of language, such as syntax and frequent repetitions, deserve careful consideration when trying to penetrate the Soviet mind. The basic point to remember, though, is that every word or phrase potentially can carry more than one meaning.

"Reverse Analysis"

Just as peering down the wrong end of a telescope can reveal some features of the observer at the other end, a student of the Soviet military can learn something about its members' own thinking by watching their writings about the West. For lack of a better expression, this method can be labeled "reverse analysis."

In a general sense, all the methods described in this article could be regarded as "reverse analysis." They all seek to backtrack along a Soviet author's line of reasoning to his ultimate source of knowledge. Taking a narrower approach, though, "reverse analysis" seeks to catch an author "thinking Soviet" while explaining Western ideas.

A Soviet author, describing Western electronic warfare, provided a classic example.[9] Explaining that NATO considers electronic warfare to be one of the key factors on the modern battlefield, he went on to say that this was true in the "tactical, operational, and strategic" arenas. By inserting *operational*, an exclusively Soviet intermediate level of military art, he gave himself away. His purpose no doubt was to illustrate the all-inclusive nature of electronic warfare to

7. Novichkov and Pimenov, p. 589. Although this work was published in 1984, it was submitted for typesetting in October 1982.
8. A. Sergeev, "Intelligence in the Armies of the NATO Countries *(Razvedka v armiyakh stran NATO)*," *Military Herald (Voyennyy vestnik)*, No. 11, 1983, p. 83. Russian has only one word, *razvedka*, for two in English, *intelligence* or *reconnaissance*; sometimes, as in this case, the context fails to clarify which English word is the best translation.
9. V. Nazarenko, "Confrontation on the Airwaves *(Protivoborstvo v radioefire)*," *Red Star* [Moscow], 21 January 1982, p. 3, cols. 1–6.

his readers, but he probably felt compelled to show them that he was "covering all the bases." Had those three levels remained unknown until that time, an astute reader, knowing NATO only had two, would have realized immediately that he was onto something new.

The author of this article used all the methods described above to some degree in uncovering a fascinating story about the birth and development of radioelectronic combat. It became the basis of his recently completed Master's Thesis at the Defense Intelligence College. Although the methodology of unclassified studies about things Soviet seldom gets top billing, readers should keep in mind that proper attention to these basics is crucial to the accuracy of such analysis.

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