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The Culture of Military Innovation: The Impact of Cultural Factors on the Revolution in Military Affairs in Russia, the US, and Israel

by Dima Adamsky

Reviewed by Dr. Stephen Blank, Research Professor at the Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College

For the last twenty years, the military operations of major powers have at times been executed under the auspices of the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA). This revolution involves the application of modern technologies related to precision guidance and strike, the systematic application of high-tech sensors, electronics, and information technology as they relate to existing and new weapons systems in an effort to achieve synergies and enhance combat power. But the history of the RMA is by no means one of uniform adaptation of concepts. Indeed, the Soviet Union and its successor, the Russian Federation, the home of the original concept, have been woefully unable to translate it into practice in its various conflicts since 1979. A number of analysts blame such efforts during the Soviet period for contributing to the demise of the Soviet Union.

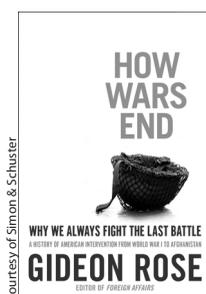
As these events were unfolding, Israel and the United States, the two states that actually materialized the RMA in practice over Lebanon in 1982 and in Operation Desert Storm in 1991, were only partially successful in translating its theory into victory. Subsequently, both states found it impossible to achieve a total victory, let alone decisive victory, despite the utilization of practices associated with the RMA. This was the case in Israel's war with Hezbollah in 2006, and in America's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the Soviet Union, practice still has not caught up to theory; in the United States and Israel, practice has failed to lead to systematic or victorious theory and may have reached a strategic dead end.

One of the book's strong points is the author's attempt to determine to what degree cultural factors at the national level and within the respective militaries contribute to this phenomenon. Adamsky is well qualified for this arduous task as she has a mastery of a wide range of sources in Russian, English, and Hebrew. Predictably, she found that the reception of emerging technologies in the fields of information and electronics that have contributed to precision guidance, strike, and computational advances differ markedly in the three states. The author confirms that technology is not neutral at least in the manner in which its consumers attempt to apply it. Whereas the Soviet military culture was quite ready to grasp many of the revolutionary transformations inherent in these emerging technologies, it was unable to acquire them for its own use, while at the same time reshaping its economy and achieving what Marxists used to identify as the unity of theory and practice.

Meanwhile, the United States was able to achieve in practice what Moscow had only dreamt about (or to be more precise some in Moscow). Even so, the United States, based on predictable cultural reasons that are brilliantly detailed in the book, had little concept of what it was actually attempting to achieve. Indeed, Desert Storm, as Soviet leaders pointed out, emulated a Soviet operational design for a European offensive albeit on a smaller scale. Predictably, the lesson from that war emphasized the overarching importance of the RMA and its emerging technologies, a fact the United States believed gave it a decisive advantage and a better understanding of what technologies would ensure decisive victory. We are still paying the price for that delusion, as now there is little consensus or understanding of what the future of war might look like. As Adamsky points out, America's failure to grasp the inherent contextual factors and its preference for focusing on the task or phenomena at hand is of no small importance in viewing the RMA.

Similarly, Israeli culture is one of improvisation and anti-intellectualism that frowned on theoretical approaches that were the hallmark of Soviet experience. As a result, Israel designed a brilliant air operation against Syria over Lebanon in 1982, an operation that was the harbinger of the RMA (and recognized as such in Soviet writings). But it failed to capitalize on the RMA in any strategic sense or to use it to fashion a successful war-winning strategy. Instead, Israel was seduced by the mythology of air power, a fact directly responsible for its failure in the battle with Hezbollah in 2006.

The future of innovation in the military realm is by no means over. Indeed, in many respects we can only guess at what might await us or other nations in the future. The only thing that seems certain is the belief that conflicts such as Afghanistan and Iraq will represent future warfare, a belief that could lead us into any number of unpleasant surprises. Greater wisdom concerning novel innovations in technology and the nature of war is required. The analysis offered in this excellent book is a good starting place to acquire that wisdom.



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How Wars End: Why We Always Fight the Last Battle

by Gideon Rose

Reviewed by Dr. James Jay Carafano, Director,
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There is a place for an important book that talks about how wars end. This is emphatically not that book. *How Wars End: Why We Always Fight the Last Battle* provides a superficial overview of the pitfalls in conflict termination from World War I to the present troubles in Afghanistan. The work concludes with three “straightforward” lessons. Rather than illuminate the challenge of fighting for peace, the