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## **Transformation Under Fire: A Historical Case Study with Modern Parallels**

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**Raymond A. Kimball**

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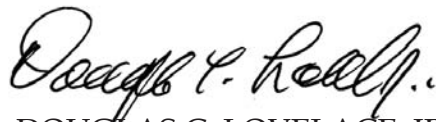
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## FOREWORD

The ideas of military transformation have been percolating within the U.S. military for more than a decade. Proponents of both “net-centric” and “fourth-generation” warfare have been arguing for specific force constructs to meet what they perceive to be the unique demands of a new type of war. The heavy demands of current operations add to the pressure to bring some kind of closure to this debate.

In this Letort Paper, Major Raymond Kimball, a veteran of both peacekeeping operations and high-intensity warfare, examines the case of the Red Army, which attempted similar military transformation under fire during the Russian Civil War. He argues that many of what were intended to be temporary fixes became permanent and defining institutions of the force, and a myopic fixation on one type of enemy had disastrous results when fighting a very different foe. He cautions against similar errors perhaps pending in our own transformational processes.



DOUGLAS C. LOVELACE, JR.  
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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

RAYMOND KIMBALL, a major in the U.S. Army, currently serves as an Assistant Professor of History and the Operations Officer, Center for Company-Level Leadership, at the U.S. Military Academy (USMA). He has served as an Army Aviator since being commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in 1995. His past assignments include service as an aeroscout platoon leader, battalion and aviation task force logistics officer, and aviation unit maintenance troop commander. His operational experience encompasses counterdrug operations on the Mexican border, peacekeeping operations in Bosnia, and high-intensity conflict during the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Most recently, he was honored with the USMA Apgar Award for Excellence in Teaching. He holds a B.S. in Russian and German from USMA, and M.A.s in History and Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies from Stanford University.

## SUMMARY

Rarely have an army's fortunes shifted so much in such a short period. At the end of 1917, the Imperial Russian Army, bled dry and exhausted from the twin blows of tsarist incompetence and prolonged modern warfare, essentially ceased to exist. The military situation in 1920 could scarcely have been more different. The Red Army's military supremacy over the territory of the soon-to-be Soviet Union was unchallenged and acknowledged by the world's major powers. All of this made what happened next even more shocking. Later that same year, the Soviets would find themselves utterly defeated and thrown back by the Polish Army, an organization nearly one-tenth the size of the Red Army fielded by a state that had been obliterated from existence for 120 years and reconstituted only 2 years prior. This paper illustrates the hazards inherent in transforming a military under fire, and provides some cautionary lessons for the current U.S. efforts at military transformation.

The outbreak of civil war in June 1918 galvanized the creation of the fledgling Workers' and Peasants' Red Army, authorized by the Congress of Soviets only 6 months before. Specific focus areas for the Supreme Military Council, the chief military body of the new force, included leader development, new organizations and doctrine for the force, and a logistical system capable of supporting warfare across the vast distances of Russia. All of these were shaped by the pressures of transformation under fire, and those transformations would have great impact later. The most significant outcome of these pressures was the permanency of supposedly temporary institutions like the commissars and the limited role of the noncommissioned officer

(NCO) corps.

Although the Bolsheviks showed real innovation and a healthy pragmatism in constructing their new force, their transformational efforts were ultimately doomed by a stubborn refusal to recognize their own limitations. Flush with victory, the Soviets drove west to settle old scores with the Poles, only to discover that their force was overmatched and incapable of adjusting to the new terrain and enemy. In a very real sense, the Red Army never really knew who it was fighting in Poland, and thus could not bring any of its strengths to bear. Additionally, its methods of logistics and command and control were all shaped by the long fight with the Whites and were wholly unsuitable for battle against a very different enemy.

The parallels and warning signs for U.S. efforts at transformation while simultaneously prosecuting a Global War on Terror are striking and ominous. Specific lessons offered include:

1. Armies at war, and the governments who oversee them, must be willing to accept a limited amount of compromise between the ideological designs of the government in power and the practical imperatives of war.

2. Armies that create “temporary” military institutions designed to meet only the exigencies of the current conflict should be aware that such organizations may rapidly achieve a state of permanency.

3. Armies at war are dynamic institutions subject to constant stresses of varying forms and degrees. Such institutions must possess reactive and responsive organs capable of rapidly assimilating lessons learned and current trends and putting them into practice.

4. The greatest danger inherent in transformation under fire is the hazard of creating a force geared

towards defeating a specific enemy at the expense of more broad-based capabilities.





## **TRANSFORMATION UNDER FIRE: A HISTORICAL CASE STUDY WITH MODERN PARALLELS**

Rarely have an army's fortunes shifted so much in such a short period. At the end of 1917, the Imperial Russian Army, bled dry and exhausted from the twin blows of tsarist incompetence and prolonged modern warfare, essentially ceased to exist. The military situation in 1920 could scarcely have been more different. The Red Army's military supremacy over the territory of the soon-to-be Soviet Union was unchallenged and acknowledged by the world's major powers. The army contained a core cadre of loyal, battle-hardened soldiers and capable leaders who had demonstrated the ability to fight and win under terrible conditions, including mass desertions of their own men. The military high command was implementing new organizational structures and doctrine that was fundamentally different from anything in Russia's past. The soldiers of the Red Army might be battle-weary and exhausted, but no more so than the general populace, who accorded the soldiers their due respect and admiration, as well as fear and suspicion of the new power in their midst.

All of this made what happened next even more shocking. Later that same year, the Soviets would find themselves utterly defeated and thrown back by the Polish Army, an organization nearly 1/10th the size of the Red Army fielded by a state that had been obliterated from existence for 120 years and reconstituted only 2 years prior. Debates raged for years within the Soviet military hierarchy about "who lost Poland," and much of the debate soon took the additional burden of the power struggle between Stalin and Trotsky,

with historians and former officers squaring off their narratives into opposing camps.<sup>1</sup> Although compelling cases can be made for individual failures in leadership, operational planning, and focus, these cases miss seeing the bigger picture. In fact, the crushing defeat of the Soviets in the Russo-Polish war of 1920 is a perfect example of well-intentioned transformation gone awry. In this paper, I will briefly outline how the Red Army transformed itself in constant combat from 1918 to 1920, and why those transformed forces and institutions were completely unsuitable for the fight that followed. I will then conclude the paper with an extrapolation of lessons learned in comparison to current transformational efforts.

## **A CLEAN SWEEP OF THE REMAINS: TRANSFORMING UNDER FIRE**

The outbreak of civil war in June 1918 galvanized the creation of the fledgling Workers' and Peasants' Red Army, authorized by the Congress of Soviets only 6 months before. With foreign and domestic enemies seemingly around every corner, the need for force transformation was real and immediate. As Leon Trotsky, founder of the Red Army, put it:

With us, the problem was to make a clean sweep of the remains of the old army, and in its place to build, under fire, a new army, whose plan was not to be discovered in any book. This explains sufficiently why I felt uncertain about my military work, and consented to take it over only because there was no one else to do it.<sup>2</sup>

Specific focus areas for the Supreme Military Council, the chief military body of the new force, included leader development, new organizations and doctrine for the

force, and a logistical system capable of supporting warfare across the vast distances of Russia. All of these were shaped by the pressures of transformation under fire, and those transformations would have great impact later.

The quandary for the Red Army in selecting its military leaders was the unknown capabilities and loyalties of the leaders available to them. Ultimately, this need was filled through a varied accession of “military specialists”—that is, former tsarist officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs)—vigilantly watched by commissars; and a growing number of “Red Commanders,” specially trained in the Party’s new schools of warfare. In 1918 alone, nearly 22,000 former Imperial officers were pressed into service in the Red Army; by the end of the war, that number would grow to over 48,000.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, over 150,000 former tsarist NCOs accepted officer positions in the Red Army during the course of the civil war.<sup>4</sup> To keep a watchful eye over the untrusted “military specialists,” the Council created the position of unit commissar, which provided a means of enforcing the goals of the party without losing the expertise present in the hands of the military specialists.<sup>5</sup> The commissar was not only observing the commander, but his subordinates as well; the commissar had the authority and duty to remove anyone from the unit who failed to measure up to the standards of the party.<sup>6</sup> Finally, beginning in 1918, the Council began to train its own commanders (known as “Red Commanders” or *KrasKom*), with the aim of ultimately replacing both the military specialists and the commissars. The *KrasKom* schools turned out tens of thousands of graduates, many of whom were just as quickly killed on the terrible battlefields of the Civil War.<sup>7</sup>

This dire need for capable officers at all levels left a significant gap in small-unit leadership, as there was no means to rapidly fill the resulting shortfalls in the ranks of sergeants. To address this shortage, the Red Army completely overhauled its structure of orders and management. Rather than having the traditional method of officers planning and giving orders and NCOs executing, the leadership of the Red Army chose to define two types of leadership. The first type included those at the division and higher level who came up with the ideas and grand schemes of maneuver, and initiated the lower-level unit movements and actions necessary to carry out the plan. The second tier, consisting of regimental/brigade commanders and below, focused on the implementation and execution of such orders.<sup>8</sup> This significant change in leader doctrine had reverberations throughout the command structure. Commanders at all levels recognized two different types of military documents: *direktivy*, or directives, which gave the receiving commander some flexibility and autonomy in the execution of his plan, and *prikazy*, or orders, which mandated the exact sequence of operations to be followed.<sup>9</sup> This emasculation of the NCO corps and transfer of its responsibilities to the officer corps persisted throughout the civil war, and, in fact, became a defining characteristic of the Red Army and its successor, the Soviet Army.<sup>10</sup>

The Soviet leadership took to heart the hard lessons of WWI, and set itself to the task of creating a new force structure and doctrine to cope with what it saw as the changing face of war. The primary driver of doctrine in the new force was Trotsky's emphasis on the concepts of *objective* and *unity of command*. In Trotsky's view, the most important task laid before the commander was the selection of the primary direction

of the main blow, which should be a crucial element of the opposition's combat power. Once the primary objective was identified, commanders were expected to follow through to the annihilation of the target.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, the Supreme Military Council placed a heavy emphasis on unity of command, following Trotsky's directive that "a unity of poor methods is superior to a diversity of good ones."<sup>12</sup> Flexibility in the planning and execution of orders was granted to army and divisional commanders, but no lower.<sup>13</sup> As previously noted, the primary role of leaders at the regimental level and below was proficient and vigorous execution of the plans and orders developed by higher headquarters.

The primary element of the Red fighting forces was the rifle division, and although severely constrained by the realities of the ongoing fight, Russian military planners showed great vision in their organizational designs. The plans for the infantry division called for a robust combined arms force based on a triangular design of three infantry brigades complemented by supporting arms. The regiment was the primary combined arms formation within the brigade, consisting of three rifle battalions, and a staff section containing experts on artillery spotting, support, political education, and engineer planning.<sup>14</sup> Each rifle division had a large subset of supporting arms subordinate to the division commander. By far the largest supporting arm within the division was to be the artillery, which had five battalions of guns (two light, two medium, and one heavy) to bring to bear in the fight. Each brigade was to have an assigned medical battalion, and the division commander retained control of sanitation, epidemic disease, and hygienic detachments which were expected to minimize the losses due to disease and poor field hygiene. Finally, an extensive logistics and

support apparatus was planned for the division, giving each an assigned support company to handle resupply of necessities like food, water, and ammunition.<sup>15</sup>

Although the planners created magnificent ideas and schemes for combined arms formations, the reality of the rifle divisions actually employed during the civil war was very different. The planned rifle division was supposed to have 58,000 men under its command; most divisions considered themselves fortunate to have a quarter of that number.<sup>16</sup> The relatively low technical competence and literacy of the Russian people and the massive personnel turbulence caused by desertions stymied all initial attempts to create the kind of specialized competence needed for mass formations of artillery, engineers, and other technical branches. For the most part, division commanders took their available manpower and threw them into the line as infantry, sparing only those who could already demonstrate technical competence in such needed fields as medicine or the support branches.<sup>17</sup> While divisions might remain relatively unchanged in terms of higher command and staff, lower units were in a constant state of turmoil as commanders strove to replace losses with whatever troops were at hand.<sup>18</sup> The establishment of the rifle division as a true combined-arms formation would have to wait until well after the end of the Civil War.

Soviet military planners were well aware of just how much the widespread civil war would challenge their heavily strained capabilities. From the start, Soviet planners chose to put the entire country on a war footing in order to meet the demand. The mid-1918 plans for budget and supply distributions were gargantuan in scale; they called for the Red Army to receive enormous shares of the country's production:

25 percent of flour, 40 percent of grain, 50 percent of grits, 60 percent of meats, 90 percent of footgear, and all tobacco. In all, the 1918 Soviet budget was 28 billion rubles, with the Red Army receiving two-thirds of that total.<sup>19</sup> Industry was likewise consolidated; by the beginning of 1919, the country's monthly output was 100,000 rifles, 600 machine guns, 40-50 artillery pieces, 90,000 artillery shells, and 35 million rounds of small arms ammunition.<sup>20</sup> It was not enough: No unit ever managed to get its full complement of weapons and supplies. A secret General Staff Report prepared in February 1919 estimated that the force was short by 239,000 rifles, 837,000 carbines (short-barreled rifles useful for close-in fighting), 14,500 machine guns, and 2,650 artillery pieces. The report also noted that of those troops who had rifles, typically only 10 percent of them had bayonets, leaving them at a severe disadvantage in close combat.<sup>21</sup> Other elements that crippled Soviet logistics were hoarding by local officials and a lack of capable staff officers, since almost every available leader was needed for service at the front.<sup>22</sup>

Because of these limitations, the higher echelon logistics effort was usually improvised and shifted according to the priority of effort, or which front was in the greatest danger of being overrun. Trotsky understood that such constantly shifting priorities would disrupt the sustainment to other units which might need the supplies equally badly. However, he correctly judged that a timely infusion of supplies at a critical point could make a difference and was thus worth the potential disruption.<sup>23</sup> One key advantage in the area of sustainment held by the Red Army over their White opponents made this flexibility possible: the availability of interior lines. Since the Red Army was fighting foes largely on its periphery rather than



its interior, they were able to shift men, equipment, and supplies within the Soviet Union as needed to meet requirements on different fronts.<sup>24</sup> The White armies had no such capability, either organizationally or geographically. Even if there had been such a possibility, it is doubtful that the factionalized White forces would have been capable of such joint efforts. White commanders typically focused on the actions in their immediate area, and gave little regard to what was happening in other regions, even if it indirectly affected them.<sup>25</sup>

Because no reliable central source of supply was available, Red Army units were almost entirely dependent on local requisitioning and foraging for supplies. Detachments conducting reconnaissance deep into White positions had no capability for carrying supplies, and had to steal what they needed from the local populace, an action that often turned towns against them.<sup>26</sup> A common tactic of partisan groups operating behind White lines was to distribute guerilla groups in small numbers among a wide population of towns. Not only did this lessen the chances of discovery, but it also eased the logistical impact of feeding and assisting guerillas on the small villages.<sup>27</sup> The necessity of foraging also made urban areas primary targets. Commanders often planned their attacks based on where they thought the largest concentration of usable materiel would be rather than where the enemy was or the strategic utility of a location.<sup>28</sup> Local requisition and supply often tied units to urban areas, preventing them from conducting any type of extended campaigns against their foes and rendering them vulnerable to disease and sickness.<sup>29</sup>

All of these transformed structures enabled the Red Army to ultimately defeat its White opponents,

though not without significant costs in manpower and physical destruction. These same innovations that had ultimately led to victory in the vast steppes of Russia would soon be main contributors to the Soviet Union's defeat in 1920.

## **THE POLISH CAMPAIGN: THE WRONG ARMY AT THE RIGHT TIME**

Before discussing the actual sequence of Red Army attack and Polish counter, it is useful to examine the terrain on which these actions played out, especially in contrast to the areas where the Red Army had been previously fighting. The terrain of what is today Belarus and eastern Poland is fundamentally different from the steppes of central Russia and the open tundra of Siberia. In addition to the obvious climatic differences, the Polish terrain was dotted with many small lakes, large clusters of hard rock densely packed with tall pines, and large marshes with extensive waterworks. All of these were not prohibitive of movement in and of themselves, but disrupted the movement of large troop formations and greatly hindered communications between separate units.<sup>30</sup> Two natural lowland zones in the north and south canalized any attacking forces into two separate and nonsupporting columns and provided defenders with predictable avenues of approach on which to set up defenses in depth. Also, at this time there were very few roads and bridges in the area capable of supporting large amounts of traffic. The local railways were the only reliable means of large-scale transport, but even they proved problematic due to the variety of rail gauges (German, Austrian, and Russian) placed by occupying powers during different times in Polish history. There were no widespread telegraph or

telephone networks in place, so field communication mostly relied on wireless radio or dispatch runners.<sup>31</sup> Overall, then, it was terrain that was ideally suited to the defense, and even more so when the defender was intimately familiar with the hidden paths and smaller trafficable avenues inherent in this type of temperate zone.

In June 1920, the Soviets launched their offensive, the principal aim of which was to cut off and destroy the extended Polish Army while placing the Red Army in a position to strike deeply at the Polish heartland and eventually capture Warsaw. Initial efforts at breaching the Polish lines using the shock effect of mass cavalry attacks, a tactic that had frequently worked against White forces, proved unsuccessful against the relatively disciplined Polish forces.<sup>32</sup> Finally, on June 5, using a combined arms approach that applied infantry assaults and artillery superiority at a weak point in the Polish lines, the Soviets were eventually able to penetrate through the enemy positions. This created a gap through which exploitation forces poured, all seeking to cut off the Polish lines of retreat. The Cavalry Army quickly rushed through the breach and surged towards Poland; unfortunately, they were the only Red Army force capable of such rapid movement. The infantry formations struggled to move quickly enough to keep up with their cavalry and the retreating Poles. Because of the Soviets' lack of a mobile reserve and few forward stockpiles capable of supporting deep operations, the Poles were able to conduct an orderly retreat back to their own borders and preserve forces that would otherwise have been cut off and destroyed.<sup>33</sup>

Nevertheless, retreat is still a demoralizing position, and the Polish forces found themselves in a race to reestablish new defenses while the Red forces used

their success to motivate their soldiers and spur them on to what they perceived as impending victory. By July 10, the Soviets had advanced their forward positions to the prewar borders of Poland, and had launched fresh offensives by the newly constituted 3rd Cavalry Corps, whose mission was to attempt to turn the Polish flanks and disrupt the interior lines of communication. Again, the lack of any type of mobile reserve hindered the amount of success such deep operations could expect, and the Poles were able to preserve the bulk of their combat power even as they successively gave up key strategic positions. By August 12, the Red Army stood on the banks of the Vistula River, preparing for the final assault into Warsaw while the Soviet government announced the imminent arrival of a new communist government in the capital.<sup>34</sup>

At this point, the Poles saw their opportunity to attack an extended force, and launched an assault of their own that quickly overwhelmed the Red positions and sent the Soviet forces hurtling back in retreat. The Poles took advantage of a seam that had developed between the Soviet Western and Southwestern Armies, and struck deep behind the positions of both forces to cut key lines of communication and strike panic into the soldiers of the enemy. One of the chief reasons for the development of the seam was the invasion of the Crimea by Baron P. N. Wrangel, a tsarist cavalry division commander during World War I who took advantage of the Soviet focus on Poland to marshal his forces and strike at relatively undefended areas, rapidly advancing through the southwestern areas of Soviet territory. This unexpected assault caused the Soviet High Command to shift focus and resources to fend against Wrangel during a critical time in the Polish campaign. Finding his forces divided and

unable to mount a coordinated counterattack, M. N. Tukhachevsky, the commander of Red Army forces in the West, ordered a withdrawal to the Soviet frontier. Here, after a series of sporadic small-unit actions, the border finally stabilized after extensive negotiations between the Soviets and the Poles.

The Red Army that had become the unquestioned land power within Russian territory had been decisively beaten by a much smaller opponent. The reasons for this defeat primarily lay in the areas of intelligence, command and control, and force structure, all of which relied mainly on innovations put in place during the Civil War.

### **Strategic and Tactical Intelligence.**

In a strategic sense, the Soviets never really understood who they were fighting during the Polish campaign. Obsessed with the idea that the White forces and their foreign supporters were behind every misfortune and threat to the Soviet system, the Bolshevik leadership consistently labeled the Polish threat as a tool of capitalist oppression. Lenin labeled the Polish offensives of 1919 as White offensives, even though the Communist Party chief of Wilno emphatically stated in a letter to the Voenni Vyshii Soviet (VVS, or Supreme Military Council) that the occupiers of the city were Polish regulars, not White infantry.<sup>35</sup> In a December 15, 1919, editorial in *L'Internationale Communiste*, Trotsky proclaimed that "the Polish lords and gentry will snatch a temporary, marauders' victory, but when we have finished with Denikin, we shall throw the full weight of our reserves onto the Polish front." Soviet citizens responded to such appeals with enthusiasm, and many ex-Imperial officers who had previously refused

to fight on either side joined the Red Army specifically to serve in the Polish campaign.<sup>36</sup> Nor was all of this simply propaganda for external consumption; official documents, communiqués, and internal government traffic during this time routinely refers to Poles as *belopolyaki* (“White Poles”) and Poland as “White Poland” or “White Guard Poland.”<sup>37</sup> The quality of strategic intelligence did not improve during the campaign either; the focus on Warsaw as the center of gravity of the Polish resistance was largely motivated by a belief that the Polish armed forces were worn out and that a large symbolic defeat would be enough to dissolve the army completely.<sup>38</sup>

The lack of Soviet understanding of the composition and motivation of their enemies extended to the operational and tactical level as well. There were wide disparities between the estimates of higher headquarters and field commands on the actual strength and composition of Polish forces. In late May 1920, the General Staff estimated the strength of the Polish Army at 75,000, while Tukhachevsky’s field intelligence officer put the number at only 56,000. Actual contact and combat with the enemy only made these disparities worse; a July 4 estimate published by the field headquarters put the number of enemy effectives at 95,000, while in reality the Polish Army had only 58,000 in position on the front at that time.<sup>39</sup>

One of the main reasons for this disparity in actionable intelligence was the lack of tactical and strategic assets on the Soviet side. Throughout the fight, the Poles were screening their lines with partisan bands, so the Red forces had no current intelligence until the Cavalry Army made its initial penetration. Even worse, that force, intended to be the “eyes and ears” of the entire Western Front, had no means to relay back its findings

or reports on enemy dispositions except through ad hoc messages from the Army rear command post.<sup>40</sup> Red Commanders were routinely surprised by the high quality and discipline of Polish troops. In a message to Tukhachevsky during his initial offensive, Budyenny expressed his surprise that the Polish infantry did not try to save their lives by joining the Red Army when overrun, a frequent practice of captured White forces. Tukhachevsky himself reported in a June 12 summary that “the enemy handles his armies excellently” and “the Polish Army exudes Europeanism”; in many ways, he regarded them as superior in training and discipline to the Red forces. Tukhachevsky was continually frustrated by his inability to consummate the destruction of an enemy unit; he believed that if he could cut off a Polish force, it would dissolve into mass retreat as its White counterpart had during the Civil War.<sup>41</sup>

The Soviets completely failed to understand that they were no longer fighting White forces, but a completely different enemy with an entirely different set of strengths and weaknesses. Unfortunately, the Red Army had no means of assessing ahead of time exactly what those strengths and weaknesses were because it had never developed any type of intelligence apparatus. Such specialized units were wholly unnecessary during the campaigns against the Whites, where most of the opposing leadership was intimately known by the Red Army commanders. Those Red commanders who needed additional information about the strength or composition of their opponents could easily get it from any of the partisan or anarchist forces operating in the White Rear. Against an enemy fighting on his own terrain with an entirely different ethnic and social identity, the Red Army found itself

completely deprived of any means of collecting usable battlefield intelligence, and consequently went into the fight “blind.”

### **Command and Control.**

The failures in command and control on the part of the Red Army were plentiful and apparent from the start of the Polish campaign. There was little to no attempted coordination by the civil authorities or the General Staff between the Western and Southwestern Armies; instead, each was given a vague list of objectives and told to exploit them as best they could. Neither army was ever defined as the main effort nor given adequate means to support its operations; instead, the Red Army command simply reinforced whoever was enjoying the most success at a given time.<sup>42</sup> This organizational friction was compounded by the unduly competitive spirit present between the Army commanders and the desire to obtain the glory of victory at all costs. Lateral coordination between the two forces was nonexistent, and no attempt was ever made to coordinate attacks or movements to better enhance the goals and objectives of the total force. Ultimately, this allowed field commanders at all levels to dispute orders that they disagreed with and drag their feet in execution, often letting fleeting opportunities for exploitation slip by.<sup>43</sup>

In comparison, the Polish forces maintained a unity of command that served them well even under the most trying conditions. Pilsudski also had to contend with a wide variety of talented commanders who each felt that he and he alone had the right combination of ideas and forces that could bring victory for the Polish cause. The crucial difference was that Pilsudski had unquestioned authority over all of them and could



make his decrees stick. The best example of this is shown in the defense of Warsaw. On August 6, recognizing the untenability of his current positions, Pilsudski completely reorganized the Polish Army's operational command structure, consolidating four field armies into three and assigning them entirely new objectives. The Northern Army, holding terrain where mobility would be highly restrictive, and facing well-emplaced Red forces, was given mostly reserve armies charged solely with holding their current positions against any incursion. The Southern Army was given similar resources and charged with preventing any type of effective traffic or communication between the Red Western and Southwestern fronts. The Central Army was given priority of troops and support in every category, as well as every mobile asset available to the Polish Army to enhance their striking power.<sup>44</sup> All of these actions were taken under the looming threat of capture and destruction by the Red forces, and were successful only because of Pilsudski's command ability and unchallenged authority.

So how is it possible that a force such as the Red Army that had fought multiple opponents for nearly 2 years of constant combat displayed such poor command and control? The answer lies in the decentralized nature of fighting during the Civil War. Because the White generals notoriously failed to coordinate their activities and movements with one another, there was no impetus for the Red Army to develop a unified command structure. Instead, because of the long distances between the central headquarters in Moscow and the field headquarters, it was much more effective to allow field commanders to prosecute the campaign as they saw fit, with intervention from higher headquarters only when absolutely dictated

by untenable losses of either men or territory. This command strategy which worked so well against the disjointed and bickering Whites proved disastrous against a Polish command that was unified against the threat and able to rapidly reorganize itself to exploit the changing tactical circumstances. The great irony here is that in prosecuting the Polish campaign, the Red commanders behaved almost exactly like the White commanders they had just defeated!

### **Force Structure and Capabilities.**

The infantry-centric organization of the Red Army was wholly unsuitable for the rapid war of movement, exploitation, and pursuit that was waged during the Polish Campaign. The restrictive terrain on which the campaign was waged meant that mobility would be at a premium, as units struggled to capture and hold the vital mobility corridors that allowed access to the Polish interior. Since masses of men could not march across the terrain in waves, the Polish defenders were able to concentrate their defenses on these critical avenues of approach and force the Red Army to come to them. The Red Cavalry might well blow a hole in the enemy lines and be positioned to strike deep into the Polish rear, but no other forces had sufficient mobility to follow them and secure their lines of communication. Without this type of mobile reserve, any deep penetration by the Red Army would quickly turn into a force surrounded by hostile troops and cut off from any type of relief. Although the exploits of the Cavalry Army and other mobile units were highly publicized, these units were very much in the minority. In fact, only seven major cavalry units were committed to the fight, and the majority of them were assigned

under the aegis of the Cavalry Army.<sup>45</sup> Because of their limited mobility and inability to exploit a major breach, Red forces inevitably surrendered the initiative back to the Polish defenders.

Soviet forces also had to contend with threats from the air for the first time since World War I. The Polish air squadrons, although small in number, gave their armed forces a decisive advantage in both observation capabilities and in limited attack roles. These units, operating from fixed bases and supply trains, contained a large number of veteran pilots and foreign volunteers who flew hundreds of sorties in support of the Polish Army. Having never had to face an opponent with air capabilities, the Soviets had no dedicated anti-aircraft artillery, nor did they have an effective air arm of their own. The best that most Red Army units could provide for aerial observation was balloon observers moored to stationary artillery positions, which became easy targets for fires from both the ground and Polish aircraft and were usually destroyed within hours of going aloft.<sup>46</sup> In his book *Red Cavalry*, Isaac Babel recounts the helplessness and terror wrought on unprotected ground forces by Polish air attacks.

[My] Troop-leader Trunov pointed out the four specks in the sky . . . they were massive armored planes, machines of the Air Squadron of Major Faunt-le-ro. Trunov started leveling his machine-gun . . . The major and his bombers . . . dropped down to 300 meters and shot up first Andrushka and then Trunov. None of the shots fired by our men did them any harm . . . so after half-an-hour, we were able to ride out and fetch the corpses.<sup>47</sup>

The force structure of the Red Army was ill-suited for fighting the Polish Army in Poland because it had been specifically designed and shaped to fight the

forces of the Whites on the open steppes and tundra of Russia. In the long drawn-out campaigns of the Civil War, victory did not come from lightning strikes and dazzling cavalry charges, but from bloody battles of attrition that ground down the opposing force and forced the enemy commander to cede crucial towns and farmland that could be used to sustain the force and grant it legitimacy. Likewise, air defense systems were never a priority for the Red Army because the Whites suffered from the same materiel and training deficiencies that kept the Soviets from fielding an effective air arm. The Red Army that emerged from the Civil War was ideally geared towards taking and holding territory spread over a wide geographic area, thus denying the use of that territory to its opponents. When the Soviets attempted to apply the same strategy to the Polish Campaign, they discovered that rapid strikes that claimed vast swathes of territory were meaningless if the defenders of that area escaped to fight another day. Without the capability to trap and destroy the Polish armies decisively, the spectacular land gains of the Red Army quickly became liabilities that stretched the force and left it vulnerable to attack.

## **CONSIDERATIONS FOR CURRENT POLICYMAKERS**

Using conclusions from one military campaign or set of campaigns to generate present-day recommendations is problematic at best. The Russian Civil War saw a unique confluence of circumstances, such as industrial obsolescence, an exhausted and war-weary population, and an ideological imperative that are not likely to be completely replicated in other conflicts. Each of these elements, along with others

discussed previously, colored and altered the way in which the Red Army fought. Nevertheless, there are some limited lessons about creating and reforming an army at war that can be drawn from the story of the Red Army and applied to present-day transformation efforts.

**Armies at war, and the governments who oversee them, must be willing to accept a limited amount of compromise between the ideological designs of the government in power and the practical imperatives of war.**

No die-hard communist could be sanguine about the use of former Imperial officers to defend the gains of a revolution that had undermined the commanders' fighting forces and advocated the eradication of such men as a class. Likewise, battle-hardened officers and sergeants who had learned hard lessons about the realities of modern war were wary of the orders coming from men they perceived to be starry-eyed idealists. The compromise in military doctrine and organization, which sought to find a balance between the revolutionary warfare espoused by the Bolsheviks and the cautious pragmatism of the World War I veterans is another example of finding the middle ground between two ideals. Both sides quickly came to realize that the survival of the country, rather than the ultimate achievement of either side's goals, had to be the immediate and overarching objective of the force, and they were able to temporarily bury their differences.

Regrettably, the present state of U.S. armed forces operations abroad shows that this needed balance is severely out of whack. After the apparent success of precision strike mixed with unconventional warfare in Afghanistan, senior Department of Defense (DoD)

officials were all too willing to use the coming fight in Iraq as a showcase for a vision of lighter, more rapid, “net-centric” warfare. Time-Phased Force Deployment Lists that were originally intended to push hundreds of thousands of troops into the region were picked apart to minimize both reserve callups and overall troop presence.<sup>48</sup> Despite a growing need for troops to provide security in Iraq, these same ideologues adamantly maintained their stance of a lean presence, allowing a fledgling insurgency to gain momentum. Only after the dangers of the insurgency became apparent did senior civilian leaders drop the idea of reductions in force in theater.<sup>49</sup> The 2006 *Quadrennial Defense Review* is especially noteworthy in this light, as it integrates both the vision of a networked battlefield, in which total transparency rules the day, as well as a more complex operating environment that requires the use of irregular warfare and massive interagency cooperation to further the process of “nation-building.”<sup>50</sup>

Nor is this ideological myopia limited to the OSD; similar “vision” problems persist with the Army’s Future Combat Systems (FCS) program. FCS promises to revolutionize warfare with a “system of systems” approach, tied together with a seamless network “that allows ‘seamless delivery of data’ in the heat of combat.”<sup>51</sup> That such a “seamless” environment rarely exists in the controlled environment of the Combat Training Centers and never in the realities of combat is not permitted to counter the argument. In one video scenario outlining possible uses of the FCS, non-line-of-sight (NLOS) fires always land exactly when and where they are needed, enemies obligingly separate themselves from the civilian population, and supplies arrive exactly on time, negating the need for heavy basic

loads. None of this is borne out by the current operating environment. Even the program's slogan ("Victory at the Speed of Light") belies the emphasis on protracted conflict currently found in most DoD programs. In fact, the entire program resembles nothing so much as John Antal's short story "Battleshock XXI," in which a high-tech, "on sim" future force is defeated by local fighters using commercial off-the-shelf technology to blind and confuse the scattered attackers.<sup>52</sup> That this volume was published well before FCS was ever proposed should serve as a caution for those seeking to transform in the face of reality.

**Armies that create "temporary" military institutions designed to meet only the exigencies of the current conflict should be aware that such organizations may rapidly achieve a state of permanency.**

The use of commissars in the force was originally only intended as an emergency measure designed to ensure the loyalty of the military specialists. Once the system of dual command took root in the force, however, the commissar became an indispensable part of the military command system, and political officers at all levels remained an integral part of the Soviet Armed Forces for the remainder of their history. In this way, the military became a mirror of Soviet society, with its parallel structures of Party and State. Likewise, the decimation of the NCO corps to fill the officer ranks and the subsequent transfer of NCO duties to the officer corps was also to be only a temporary measure. Nothing succeeds like success, however, and the altered command structure was kept in place as proof of a new Soviet way of waging war.

In the same manner, the current Army planning guidance emphasizes that the current focus on Brigade Combat Teams (BCTs) in the Modular Force is only that:

a transient emphasis designed to transition seamlessly at some later date to the Future Force. In this model, new technologies and ideas are constantly “spiraled in,” improving the force incrementally over time and minimizing the impacts on current operations.<sup>53</sup> This extended transformation, while laudable in theory, ignores the extensive investments in infrastructure and personnel movements currently underway to support the new BCT structure. Entire posts are moving from relatively quiet Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) status to supporting brigades or entire divisions. This, coupled with the latest Base Realignment and Closure actions currently underway, will likely shape the size and structure of the force to a far greater extent than spiraled technologies and networked systems. By choosing to transition to a BCT-centric structure, the current Army leadership has essentially placed a standing bet that the brigade will be the primary operational arm of the Army for years to come.

Likewise, current personnel decisions being made to support an increased operational demand are likely to have generational effects that will be felt for some time to come. In the officer corps, the decision to eliminate the Combined Arms and Services Staff School (CAS<sup>3</sup>) has removed a vital leveler of experience and knowledge between officers of different branches and functional areas.<sup>54</sup> Although branch Captain’s Career Courses are supposed to pick up the slack in staff methods instruction, it is difficult to see how they will replicate the wide diversity of experience and knowledge present in CAS<sup>3</sup>. In a similar manner, the constant pushback and waiving of the Warrior Leader’s Course (WLC) for soldiers selected to NCO rank is a worrisome sign of lowered expectations for NCO education in the future



force. The current policy allows soldiers to be promoted to the rank of Staff Sergeant (albeit for a limited time) without the traditional training requirement of the WLC (formerly the Primary Leadership Development Course).<sup>55</sup> This lowered standard, originally enacted as a short-term fix for deployment pressures, may well continue for the foreseeable future and have knock-on effects for further NCO schools. In the worst case, the Basic NCO and Advanced NCO courses might be similarly pushed back, undermining what has been to this point the most professional and highly educated NCO corps in U.S. Army history.

**Armies at war are dynamic institutions, subject to constant stresses of varying forms and degrees; such institutions must possess reactive and responsive organs capable of rapidly assimilating lessons learned and current trends and putting them into practice.**

The “Red Commander” training academies stand out as a poor example of this imperative; the refusal of the school trainers to incorporate current lessons from the front, relying instead on their World War I experiences, probably took a heavy toll in lives as new commanders were forced to learn difficult lessons on the job. By contrast, the sustainment system, anemic and unreliable as it was, recognized that every unit could not be supported equally at all times. Instead, Trotsky and his deputies committed themselves to a constant process of assessment and feedback, attempting to bring critical support to bear at the times and places it was needed most. Fighting forces that are going to adapt and triumph over adversity must have similar mechanisms of information gathering, analysis, and response if they are to be successful.

The area of information sharing is perhaps the brightest spot of our transforming force. Soldiers at all

levels and positions share information and ideas with unprecedented speed. The genesis for much of this came from the grass-roots formation of *CompanyCommand.com*, a website focused on sharing ideas and innovations between company-level leaders. Almost 10 years after its inception, *CompanyCommand* and its offspring are credited with achievements as diverse as sharing vital tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) that save soldiers' lives, and allowing units to transition critical lessons learned as they move between theaters of operation.<sup>56</sup> The Army has embraced this kind of horizontal information flow, putting considerable resources and emphasis into sites such as the Battle Command Knowledge System (BCKS). BCKS encompasses a number of specialized communities of practice such as LOGNET (for logisticians) and S1NET (for personnel officers), as well as the broader S3-XONET (for field-grade leadership at the tactical level). This kind of free flow of ideas has made possible the rapid transmission of tactics from operational theater to training base to schoolhouse, often within the space of a week or less. As transformation continues, DoD should be encouraging this type of information-sharing across the force as a way of shortening decision cycles and enhancing grass-roots support for changes.

**The greatest danger inherent in transformation under fire is the hazard of creating a force geared towards defeating a specific enemy at the expense of more broad-based capabilities.**

Certainly it is not possible to create an Army capable of defeating every enemy equally; military planners and civilian leadership alike must always evaluate the threats facing them and make the difficult choices to concentrate on the most likely and dangerous of those threats. However, those same leaders must also be

cognizant of exactly what trade-offs were made, and how different operational and geographic environments will demand different capabilities of the force. The Soviet military and civilian leadership both failed to do this during the build-up to the Polish Campaign of 1920; instead, flushed with victory, they allowed themselves to believe in a quick and decisive battle against an enemy they did not truly understand.

Just as the Soviet leaders willfully misunderstood the nature of their enemy in Poland, U.S. decisionmakers for Iraq chose to remain blind to the broad based nature of their opponents.<sup>57</sup> Many early indicators surfaced in the drive to Baghdad; as then Lieutenant General William S. Wallace, commander of V Corps noted, "The enemy we're fighting is a bit different than the one we wargamed against because of these paramilitary forces."<sup>58</sup> This unwillingness to embrace complexity continued into the postwar environment, as forces opposing the coalition were variously labeled "bitter-enders," "former regime loyalists," and small groups with no central authority.<sup>59</sup> This refusal to acknowledge the onset of the insurgency, coupled with the ideological emphasis on small forces previously covered in this paper, greatly delayed the integration of needed forces and funds that could have staved off or at least mollified the insurgency. This difficulty in accurately identifying the enemy persisted for years, as one captain noted in early 2005:

I don't think there's one single person in the Army or the intelligence community that can break down the demographics of the enemy we're facing. . . . You can't tell whether you're dealing with a former Baathist, a common criminal, a foreign terrorist, or devout believers.<sup>60</sup>

Perhaps most damning is that the most complete public assessment of the threat in Iraq to date was published not by an arm of the U.S. Government, but by an outside commission charged with evaluating current policy.<sup>61</sup> Two thousand years after Sun Tzu's dictate to "Know Yourself, and Know your Enemy," we still seem to be struggling with both. A thinking and responsive enemy must be the focus of any transformation effort, which means being intellectually honest about the forces opposing us.

Just as the Soviets discarded their plans for a combined arms division in the face of civil war pressures, the Army appears to be devolving from conventional warfighting to counterinsurgency. Every branch journal brings new news of local TTPs being integrated into current schools to better prepare soldiers for the realities of Iraq and Afghanistan. The most-talked about new doctrine in the force was the recent revision of Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*; meanwhile, the Army's core warfighting doctrine, FM 3-0, *Operations*, has not been revised since June 2001. While it is certainly right and appropriate that much of the force is focused on winning the current fight, significant challenges in conventional warfighting still confront us around the world. One possible solution to this quandary has been proposed by strategist Thomas P. M. Barnett, who argues that the conflicting arguments between "net-centric" and "fourth-generation" warfare are, in fact, tackling two separate topics. He proposed the generation of two entirely separate and distinct forces: the *Leviathan* to address the ever-increasing complexity of conventional warfighting, and the *System Administrator* to win the peace.<sup>62</sup> Such a split, radical as it may be, may be the best way to address the diverging demands on today's force.

Transforming while fighting is often a necessary evil. Armies do not always have the luxury of reforming within their borders and then moving out to test their changes. Just as the Soviets were forced to rapidly commit untested forces and ideas to prolonged battle, the United States faces a hard reality of metaphorically “changing out an engine while the airplane is in flight.” When the Soviets, flush with victory in their civil war, attempted to apply the same lessons to Poland, the resulting debacle clearly illustrated the limitations of the new Red Army. If the United States is going to commit a transformed force into a new strategic or operational environment, our leadership must ensure that the force’s strengths and weaknesses adequately match the demands of the new theater of operations. Failure to do so may result in catastrophic destruction of what has been built.

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