# Lessons from the East: The Reforms of the Russian Imperial Army from 1905 to 1914

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As the dust settled in Manchuria in 1905, Imperial Russia had suffered a tremendous defeat at the hands of the Japanese in the Russo-Japanese War. Two things were clear: conflict was brewing in Europe and that in order to succeed in that conflict the Russian Imperial Army would need to cure the ailments that had caused defeat in Manchuria. In the midst of a social revolution that produced Russia's first representative government and within one of the oldest and most deeply entrenched institutions in Russia, reformers attempted to fix the Imperial Army. From 1905-1914 the Russian Military focused on reforming doctrine to better suit the modern battlefield and reforming the General Staff of the Russian Army. However, the conflicting priorities and politics in the military and aristocracy led to these reforms failing to produce victory in World War I.

The major defeats of the Russo-Japanese War displayed the flaws in doctrine that existed within the Army. The execution of the Russo-Japanese War had been a disaster. As German observer Karl Von Donat noted, the Russians still relied heavily on the ideas of Mikhail Dragomirov which extolled the use of offensive tactics as the means to victory. As a result, Von Donat observed: "the Russian regulations expected success from obsolete shock tactics without sufficient use of skirmishes and without enough preparation by fire."[1] On a modern battlefield with modern weaponry, this type of doctrine would prove disastrous. Russian officers did not learn by trial and error and despite failure, it would be hard to break the officers' reliance on Dragomirov. Throughout the conflict with Japan, General Aleksey Kuropatkin, the Russian commanding general, used a defensive strategy as he mistakenly believed his armies were vastly outnumbered and waited for mobilizing troops to move eastward. However, this defensive strategy, combined with Russian officers and soldiers being prepared only for the offensive, created chaos. In May of 1904, the Russian First Siberian Army Corps was defeated by the Japanese by the village of Vafangou. The Japanese proved their mastery of maneuver warfare as the Russians sat in the defensive and were eventually enveloped and forced to withdraw.[2] The heart of the defeat laid both in the doctrine that put almost no emphasis on maneuver

[1] Karl Von Donat, *German Account of the Russo-Japanese War: The Yalu* (London, UK, 1908), 59.

[2] John W. Steinberg, *All the Tsar's Men: Russia's General Staff and the Fate of the Empire, 1898-1914* (Washington, D.C: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2010), 129-130.

warfare and a lack of Russian initiative. By August, the opposing armies were assembled for another fight at Liaoyang. Again, Kuropatkin chose to fight a defensive battle, holding a large portion of his army in reserve. The Russians were out maneuvered again and forced to withdraw towards Mukden as Kuropatkin refused to commit his entire army.[3] In February 1905, the Russians were again defeated in the titanic Battle of Mukden. Fighting defensively, Kuropatkin was outflanked and withdrew in much the same way as at Liaoyang.[4] This string of defeats was caused by many things, not least among them Kuropatkin's personal mistakes. However, in each instance the Russian Army's inability to conduct maneuver warfare stood out as a deciding factor. This was caused both by a failure of leadership on Kuropatkin's part and a lack of precedent in doctrine that would have allowed commanders to challenge the Japanese using enveloping movements. During the inter-war period, Russian reformers would use lessons from these defeats to try to redesign Russian military doctrine.

After the defeats in Manchuria, the leaders of the Russian military worked to reform the military doctrine within the Imperial Russian Army. Some of the first changes in doctrine recognized the importance of envelopment as the best means for offensive action.[5] While still emphasizing the offensive, Russian military thinkers did away with Dragomirov's outdated theories of frontal assault. During the inter-war years, two Russian military theorists came up with different plans for unified military doctrine. The first, N. P. Mikhnevich, outlined a strategy of defense with counter-offensive coming later, once Russia built up numerical superiority—essentially arguing for a war of attrition. The second was A. A. Neznamov, who argued for "launching rapid offensive operations, but only on the grounds of sound planning and operational linkages."[6] These two theories, in particular Neznamov's, would become the basis for Russian war planning before 1914.

Central to the implementation of the new doctrine were the staff rides and war games that took place before the outbreak of greater European conflict. In the 1906 Kresnoe Selo maneuvers, the Russian Army attempted to put into practice many of the lessons they had learned fighting Japan. The demonstration was lackluster and poorly executed; both the assault and counterassault were both disasters. However, the generals were able to use the experience to make tangible improvements. In particular, Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich, commander in chief, would have a major role in reforms up until

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[3] Ibid., 136-137.
[4] Ibid., 143-144.
[5] Bruce W. Menning, "The Offensive Revisited: Russian Preparation for Future War, 1906-1914," in *Reforming the Tsar's Army*, edited by David Schimmelpenninck, Van Der Oye and Bruce W. Menning (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 216.
[6] Ibid., 229.

1914.[7] War games between 1906 and the last maneuvers before the war focused on improving these tactical and operational failings. British and American observers witnessed real improvements in the infantry, while still seeing trouble with the emplacement and use of artillery.[8] In 1914, war games were again held both in Kiev and around Helsinki and Saint Petersburg; the last before the outbreak of war. These maneuvers showed considerable progress in the operational reforms that had been focused on, but serious issues of command and control still existed.[9] The improvements in the operational realm show a victory for the reformists within the Russian Army. Maneuver warfare and enveloping attacks had seemingly replaced the frontal assault and "parade field" mentality of the past. However, the defensive lessons learned in Manchuria were all but lost in the excitement of a reenergized offensive doctrine.[10] Indeed, historian John Steinberg claimes that as late as 1913 Russian officers were "…being trained to think offensively while in practice they acted defensively."[11] The very same disconnect caused disaster in the East under Kuropatkin. The lack of defensive doctrine may still have been the remnants of I. M. Dragomirov's legacy, but it is also possible that untalented officers within the Imperial Army simply lacked the initiative and courage to execute offensively minded doctrine. Officers and command and control were another problem that became clear after the 1904-1905 Eastern War.

The Russo-Japanese War also demonstrated the ineffectual Russian officer corps and, in particular, how unprepared the officers of the General Staff were for war. Arguably the largest problem in command and control existed at the highest level of command in the theater. In order to take command of the armies in Manchuria, Kuropatkin had relinquished his post as War Minister. Arriving in theater, he then found himself technically subordinate to the Far Eastern viceroy, Admiral Y.I. Alekseev. The newly demoted Kuropatkin was by no means planning on taking orders and almost permanent conflict manifested itself when Alekseev demanded relief for the besieged Port Arthur and Kuropatkin delayed.[12] The first major Russian defeat at the Battle of the Yalu was, in fact, a result of this command dispute. Each commander gave General M. I. Zasulich and his Eastern Detachment conflicting orders. Zasulich chose the orders he liked and marched towards Port Arthur, met the Japanese near the Yalu River, and was completely defeated.[13] Even more troubling was the state of General Staff officers throughout the rest of the army. The German account of the war gives insight

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[7] Steinberg, *All the Tsar's Men*, 239-243.
[8] Ibid., 253, 256.
[9] Ibid., 268.
[10] Menning, *The Offensive Revisited,* 219.
[11] Steinberg, *All the Tsar's Men*, 258.
[12] Ibid., 123.
[13] Ibid., 125-126.

into General Staff officers who had no ability to execute modern military operations; even just moving large numbers of troops was troublesome for some generals and staff officers.[14] It is impossible to expect officers to be able to act independently or exercise initiative if they cannot even competently move their units from place to place. In most of the major battles of the war, officer initiative would indeed prove lacking. J. Taburno, a Russian war correspondent, reported on the same lack of initiative from corps commanders and lower officers since Kuropatkin himself was micromanaging their units. He described General Staff officers as lacking in the most practical experience of commanding an army, blaming them for the conduct of the war.[15] The General Staff within an army was intended to fix many of the problems that plagued the Russians in Manchuria. Problems in supply, transportation, and command and control all showed failures of the staff officers charged with leading the different aspects of the army. Also troubling was the lack of individual initiative from almost every level of command. If the Russian Imperial Army was to survive, changes had to be made to correct the problems that plagued the Officer Corps in Manchuria.

After the performance of the Russian commanders during the Russo-Japanese War, reformers turned their attention on reforming the Russian Officer Corps and, specifically, the role of the General Staff. Tsar Nicholas II began the reforms in 1905 by creating two important organizations; the State Defense Council headed by Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaievich and the Main Directorate of the General Staff. The State Defense Council was designated to be the commanding structure over both the army and navy, making the War Ministry nothing more than administrative in nature and attempting to prevent the type of conflict that arose between General Kuropatkin and Admiral Alekseev. The Main Directorate of the General Staff was simply a general staff at the highest level of the army, reporting directly to the tsar. The General Staff was to make the preparations for future war, including education and doctrine. With these organizations came a reform of the officer corps which retired 7,000 officers who were outdated or had failed in Manchuria.[16] These measures were seen by reformers as improvements as they moved towards more modern military models and created a clearer command structure.

To address the pressing issue of the incompetency of the General Staff officers, reformers turned to the Nicholas Academy of the General Staff. In 1906, the Academy's commandant was General N.P. Mikhnevich, one of the army's foremost reformers. As commandant, he sent out a survey to graduates asking how well the academy had prepared them for the conflict in Manchuria. Unsurprisingly, the responses showed officers unprepared for

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[14] Von Donat, *The Russo-Japanese War,* 64.
[15] J. Taburno, *The Truth Behind the War* (Kansas City, MO: Franklin Hudson Publishing Co., 1905), 107-108.
[16] Menning, "The Offensive Revisted", 219-220.

leading modern armies.[17] Col. A. A. Neznamov, the army's other leading reformist, agreed that the curriculum of the Nicholas Academy needed updating.[18] Mikhnevich aimed to reshape the curriculum to give officers both the practical skills needed to lead troops and the theoretical ability to respond and think in given situations. The Nicholas Academy was no longer to offer a secondary education, but instead specialized military knowledge.[19] As will be discussed later, these reforms never came to full fruition. However, more practical education did become a part of curriculum. Reform of the General Staff was desperately needed, but only partially executed. The improvements that were made did have an impact on improving the state of the officer corps, without which the doctrinal reforms would have likely been for naught. In 1910, Sukhomlinov was appointed War Minister and put the General Staff back under his authority while also increasing training for reservists. By subordinating the General Staff to the War Ministry, Sukhomlinov decreased the independence and planning ability of the General Staff, making this, in part, a counter-reform. He did, however, succeed in increasing reserve forces right before the war.[20] Coupled with the reduction of outdated officers in 1906, an increase in reservists should have provided Russia with a large and fairly well prepared officer corps by 1914. Reformists made large strides in improving the Russian officer corps; however, they were only partially successful. Many of the reforms that could have been did not survive the complex politics in both the military and the government.

The politics of Tsar Nicholas II, the Duma, and the established military elite hindered many of the reforms of the interwar years. This hindrance had dire consequences when war came in 1914. There were many conflicts between these three groups and would-be reformers. The established military elite had little desire to accept the drastic changes being suggested by reformers and wanted to maintain the status quo that had existed since Dragomirov. General Mikhnevich was relieved as commandant of the Nicholas Academy by the Main Directorate of the General Staff. An investigation into the academy made by conservative leaders found that only minor changes needed to be made in the curriculum, not the extreme reform Mikhnevich had implemented.[21] One of the most important needs of the army after Manchuria, a reformed General Staff, was prevented by the politics of the dysfunctional officer corps. The Duma saw the officers as the culprits of the

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[17] John W. Steinberg, "The Challenge of Reforming Imperial Russian General Staff Education, 1905-1909." In *Reforming the Tsar's Army*, edited by David Schimmelpenninck Van Der Oye and Bruce W. Menning (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 236-237.
[18] Ibid., 238.
[19] Ibid., 240-241.
[20] Menning, *The Offensive Revisited,* 221.
[21] Steinberg, "The Challenge of Reforming Imperial Russian General Staff Education, 1905-1909," 243, 246-247.

defeat of 1904-1905. By 1909, the first head of the General Staff had lost his job and the Grand Duke's State Defense Council was dissolved due to pressure from the Duma.[22] Many of the institutionalized changes that should have improved the command structure of the army, therefore, disappeared. The complex political situation counter-acted much of the progress that the reforms had made in the officer corps.

Also in debate was funding. The new war minister was only able to secure partial funds for the modernization of the artillery. In 1914, Russia had machine guns and light artillery but lacked in the heavy artillery needed for trench warfare.[23] After Tsushima, the fate of the reconstruction of the Russian Navy was also a funding debate. The Duma, backed by the Imperial Army, wanted a smaller navy and smaller naval budget where Nicholas II desired costly battleships. The ultimate decision to spend millions of rubles on new dreadnoughts meant that resources, spent on ships that never saw action during World War I, could have been used in reforming the army.[24] Although the reforms of the Russian military made huge strides to make the Imperial Army fit for the battlefield, the politics of the Russian military and government meant that those reforms never came to completion. The reform movement could only partially change the status quo, as both funding and policy support disappeared. Political problems in the military would continue into the war. The Grand Duke, appointed as commander in chief, was in conflict with both the war minister and the colorful Rasputin.[25] In the summer of 1915, the tsar dismissed Grand Duke Nikolai and took over command of the army, completing the disastrous political overreach that had doomed army reforms.[26]

The Russian performance in Manchuria at the Yalu, Vafangou, Liaoyang, and Mukden all proved that horrendous problems existed within the Russian Imperial Army. Chief among them was the lack of a unified military doctrine and a systematic problem in the performance of Russian officers. Reformists from 1905-1914 tried to correct these problems to varying degrees. A primary doctrine of envelopment and maneuver warfare developed and saw some success in war games up until 1914. Some strides were made in modernizing the officer corps and moderate reforms of the General Staff. However, neither of these programs could survive in the political environment of counter-reform and an autocrat adjusting to a constitutional government. As war loomed in Europe, the Russian government and military failed to properly fix its dysfunctional military. High prices would be paid at Tannenberg and in

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[22] Steinberg, *All the Tsar's Men*, 250.
[23] Menning, "The Offensive Revisited," 222.
[24] Tony E. Demchak, "Rebuilding the Russian Fleet: The Duma and Naval Rearmament, 1907–1914." *Journal Of Slavic Military Studies* 26, no. 1 (January 2013): 37-39.
[25] Marc Ferro, *Nicholas II: The Last of the Tsars* (New York, NY: Oxford Press, 1991), 157.
[26] Ibid., 161.

Galicia when the unready Russian army marched to war. Many problems caused the defeats and ultimate surrender of Russia in World War I, but few of them were so close within reach of being fixed by the government.