

30 The Russian Military and Way of War

Length of recording: 52 minutes

Transcription notes

Simo Pesu:	Interviewer
Michael Kofman:	Respondent
Pentti Forsström:	Respondent
wo-	an unfinished word
(word)	an uncertain passage in speech or an unrecognised speaker
(-)	an unrecognisable word
(--)	unrecognisable words
[pause 10 s]	a pause in speech of at least 10 seconds
, . ? :	a grammatically correct punctuation mark or a pause in speech of less than 10 seconds

[music]

Simo Pesu: Hello, listeners! So we are very pleased to have Mr. Michael Kofman, Russia Programme Director from the CNA to our guest in the Finnish National Defence University, Sotataidon ytimessä – In the Core of Warfare – podcast series. So Mike, welcome.

You have watched Russian military and way of war through your career. And you have been running a Russian way of war programme in the CNA with distinguished team. During last two years, you have devoted quite a bit of your time and effort to follow and analyse the preparations and on-going Russian war against Ukraine. You talked a lot publicly, and I think the majority of our students recognize you as prominent voice in this subject. And we are here with Doctor Pentti Forsström, senior researcher in our Russia research and teaching team, and myself (--) [01:01] Simo Pesu as head of a team.

And our students have heard quite a lot of our talking about Russian military and way of war. And I'm happy from their behalf to have you here as an educated voice on interpretations on why and how Russia prepares for war and wages war, like it does today.

It's generally difficult and especially difficult due to cultural differences also to us Finns to understand. So it might be surprising to some non-Finnish listeners, but the differences are significant despite of that we have thousand years of relatively well-acknowledged history living together with a neighbouring Russia and its predecessors. So in the end, each and every society organizes itself to a war

according to its own ambitions, needs, resources, and structures, and so on, and fights its battles as well.

Michael, I thought you would be a perfect person to talk about understanding how Russia is – as a great power, as it sees itself – has prepared itself for the on-going war, and to ponder a little bit the path the Russian military has taken in the war, and where it's leading (to them) [02:08]. So firstly, Michael, would you just briefly describe about your career: why did you ended up looking at Russian military? So what was the major thing in your life that you ended up into this business?

Michael Kofman: Sure, that's a good question. I often wonder myself how it is I got to [laughs] where I am at this point, studying the Russian forces. By the way, just say thanks for the kind invitations: good to be back in Finland, and it's good to be back with both of you. I think folks listening to this might not know that we've known each other for years. It's really not my first time at Finnish National Defence University. So it's great to be able to visit again.

Regarding my career, a lot of folks may or may not know I'm originally from Ukraine: born in Kiev and moved to the United States at the beginning of the '90s. And I was always interested in security matters, so I study international security at Georgetown School of Foreign Service, Security Studies programme. I was always interested in maybe the harder end of security issues, such as conventional warfare, nuclear strategy, advanced weapons (-) [03:16].

At a time where a lot of the field was actually not focusing on those issues: in the '90s, a lot of it was peacekeeping, peace enforcement, ethnic conflict, right? (--). counterterrorism, stability operations, low-intensity conflict, right, (--). And to me, it looked like both conventional warfare as a whole and the conflicts that were playing out (--) was called the former Soviet Union (--) conflicts in the '90s and also (--) what I and other academics have called Soviet wars of succession that played out over the course of these decades. To me (--). And so I followed the Russian military, I think, at a time when there were very few people doing (in the field). And then, that became an area of interest for the government and for other researchers, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 – I think that's where the field takes off. And I was, I think, probably (one of) people that was trying to keep the flame alight along with others who have been working professionally (at a period where there) was fundamentally generational gap, at least speaking for the United States (--) [04:24] Finland, but the interest of Russia really died off in the '90s and 2000s. So most people went into these other fields, so they want to study China or maybe cyberwarfare, what have you.

So I guess that's the short of it. And I've been (--) since I can't... I'm trying to recall now, I think, well over seven years, maybe eight.

Simo Pesu: Very good. Thank you, Michael. We Finns, we do have a lot of historical experiences of living together in peace and in war with Russia. But when we are looking at the patterns of the Russian way of war, (which) are very visible during last few years. You might have a different view on the Russian military and their thinking and where it's heading.

Russia, it's a multinational, multi(-) society, geographically huge, divided to infrastructure constraints, social inequalities. It has fought, some ways, in a similar way, (but in) [05:26] much smaller scale for several times during last 30 years. And this is the first larger war Russia's having in Europe, and (it initiated by) Russia during last 30 years.

We try to discuss a little bit about Russian military and its way of war before and during the invasion in Ukraine and try to guess a little bit where the Russian military and warfare could be heading in a shorter term and in longer term, as military normally plans.

You are very able to shuffle in between strategic and tactical level of warfare in your analysis of this war, of this on-going war (--) connecting level also between the operational level. In which Russian military thought has deep roots in a operational art. Partly, practically from necessity to organize a military (campaign's always fat land masses), but the conceptual thinking starting (--) 1920s and practices during the 1940s has a firm place in Russian military thought.

So when we go little bit behind, in the strategic level, we have a Russian concept of deterrence and concepts of defence and their relations. Russia has a persistent tendency to pre-emption of perceived security threats. The concept of initial period of war inherited from the German invasion 1940s. Politically, it defines itself to be in the defence, while attempting to invade and subjugate Ukraine. Are we just looking here as a normal great power behaviour leveraging its power, or is there something in Russian military thinking which is shuffling in between deterrence and defence? And does it have any explanation power when we are looking at this war (--) [07:18] those two concepts?

Michael Kofman: Sure, so, look, I'll stay away from the word normal, because it's freighted with a lot of... Let's put it this way: it's a politically freighted word. The way I like to think about is that, probably since the (--) 1980s, at least (looking) Russian military strategy, the thinking had begun to evolve towards a concept called active defence. One of the currents in that concept was (pre-emption or prevention, this) pre-emptive neutralization of threats that emerged towards Russia, via either course of threats, (deterrence to intimidation, fear inducement), via even potentially deterrence to limited use of force, pre-emptive strikes, and also the (--) initial period of war, which you know was taking place in Soviet military thought all the way (--) late '70s and early '80s and continued to Russian military thought in the 1990s and 2000s, (the belief that the) initial period of war is decisive, that that would last

several weeks. (--) going to be decisive initial period of war. One thing (you saw on) Russian military strategy (--) and the focus during the main periods of reforms, right, both 2012, post-2012 reforms and the ones that then... (So) if we look at kind of main periods of reforms, we have about '08 to 2012, right, and then we follow that with the reforms, to the reforms by Shoigu and Gerasimov, and that takes (--) basically a military that builds itself out first and foremost for a short, sharp war with NATO, assuming that they're going to be dealing with a fragmented battlefield, where fires and strikes are most important, where airspace defence and airspace assault are the critical (factor, initial) [09:15] period of war. (--) United States is first and foremost an expeditionary airspace power. You know, airpower tends to be sort of (--) the sharpest sword in the US arsenal. And this military also tried to hedge itself in assuming that it could force-generate for armed conflicts and local wars, right, and it was compromised in a number of ways, all militaries you see try to balance themselves between capability, capacity, and typically readiness, right? So what kind of capabilities they have, how much of it do they have, and how (--) actually... How (much of it's) actually ready for war (in any initial) period.

You know, I think that the Russian military made a lot of compromise in this regard, and it didn't serve them well in the war in Ukraine, and we can talk (a bit more about that), I think, later on this podcast. From (--) question is probably much more on the political side than the military side. (--) classical Soviet doctrine, the military was responsible for military tactical aspects of the doctrine, and the political side was responsible for (sociopolitical) aspects of the doctrine, right? And although that bifurcation doesn't quite exist the way... today in Russia the way it did in the Soviet Union, nonetheless, you see strong inheritance of that legacy.

I think in the political side, the challenge you have is that imperial powers nonetheless tend to rationalize (--) [10:39] defensive, a lot of them do. This is principally an imperialistic war. It's (a revengous) war of a country trying to reclaim territory that used to belong to them and trying to destroy Ukraine as a state. Now the way they've constructed that intellectually, right, is on the basis of a threat narrative. And the threat narrative that had emerged from Moscow over the course of several decades was one (--) NATO expansion, but one that fundamentally saw Ukraine as a sort of (--) liability to Russia strategically, and at the same time, a narrative that was overlaid with the general notion that Ukraine was not a state (--)) formative years in the late Soviet period, right? Never saw Ukraine as an independent society or as a functional state or as a state with national identity.

Last point on this. (One of the reasons) you saw a war (--) significant risk was because (Russia) had been a power that was in stagnation. Now it's probably (fair to argue it's in decline). Before you start to build out kind of (any) sort of (-) trends, have to keep in mind (--) stagnation and decline. Over the course of these (--) [12:01] history. But (--) stagnation, one thing we learnt, at least looking at some decision-making models (or theories) (--) prospect theories, is that leaders tend to take on much greater risk to avert potential losses, rather than pursuing gains. I

think from the Russian perspective, Vladimir Putin began to rationalize that not only was Ukraine lost (to them), and he was going to be the Russian leader that quote-unquote lost Ukraine, but also that, from at least Moscow's perspective, Ukraine was going to become not a member of NATO (--) (de facto member in) NATO. In many respects, this is a classical colonial war, but I think in Russia, it's been rationalized on the base of loss aversion, and that's why Putin took the risk that many thought were uncharacteristic of him, if you look at sort of his 20-year rule. Most of the wars that Putin has launched or Russia had fought under him were wars with much lower degree of risk, (with a lot of options) (--). Even the initial invasion of Ukraine in 2014 (--) of Crimea. That's why a lot of people found this kind of war to be almost uncharacteristic for him. But I look forward to your thoughts.

Simo Pesu: Thank you, Michael. When we are looking at this (problem) [13:20] from Russian point of view, they had a pretty good experience (from) the Soviet times, (on) the Afghanistan, they were (looking) (-). They understood what went wrong and what didn't went wrong. But now it seems to be that there is a pattern which they are repeating (and this same problem). You described about that little, but Pentti, how would you look into this problem? Basically, they fully understand, they do have a history, and they understand what the problems are in how they use their military, but anyways, they did the very same thing last year in Ukraine. Michael had one explanation – do you have any other explanation, so is it like that? (--).

Pentti Forsström: What really drives my interest is the... why this... Of course, this is retrospective, (which I told), and now we see that the whole thing didn't went that well as was assumed, I think, or planned. I'm not very much sure about what were actually their military plans towards Ukraine before February '22. And so I'd like to just raise a hypothesis or question about whether this is a Putin's war or the nomenclature war against... in the light of collapse of the Soviet Union, in order to regain the area of Ukraine and the historical parts of Russia again, under the Moscow rule. Or is it this military war, which was really planned? I'm not sure about that. And this I'd like to hear Mike's opinion about this, whether... Of course, the Shoigu regime and Gerasimov, they are very much loyal to the superiors, so they are trying to do what they are told to do. And was this the case or not?

Michael Kofman: (--) [15:16]. So first (--) very much as Putin's war, and I think some (folks suspect) that he is one of the few people in Russian establishment that really cares about Ukraine and this sort of legacy he's spoken about, he's written about extensively, and I think many people in Russian lead actually don't care about Ukraine all that much. (--) know about this war. And I think he is particularly sentimental about both looking (--) former Russian territories and looking at Ukraine as a country that he wanted to try to unify with (Russia and Belarus). I think (--) good sense of what the initial (war aims were: to conduct regime change) in Ukraine, to install a pro-Russian government, to occupy a large part of Ukraine, not all of it, but actually (--) exclusion of the Western part of Ukraine. And to potentially even create a larger union state treaty between Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine.

So this war was very much a conquest. And I think part of the reason it went so terribly, and has gone so terribly for Russia, this would take perhaps entire separate podcast to unpack, is, first and foremost, political assumptions drove the military concept of operations, which to me was (-) (surprise) [16:39], I think as an analyst, we falsely, at least I falsely assumed that there would be a (-) between Russia's political objectives and then the military, which run a joint force operation with engaging combined arms, land warfare, and what have you, planning for a war with a very serious (--) Ukraine had something (--) at the start of the war, (a solid) mobilization basis for the military, had the largest (--) radar-guided air defence that could be found in Europe. I'm talking multiple regiments of S-300PS, S-300V, (--) what have you. Actually quite a sizeable air defence capability. And instead, the Russian (war effort), the initial war effort, essentially (--) assumption that they could conduct a decapitation attack, right, get into Kiev, overthrow the government, and then the rest of the forces could (--) [17:39] larger version of the Russian annexation of Crimea and try to give the sense to Ukrainian leaders that the country was rapidly collapsing, and they didn't seriously expect a fight: they actually, they had the assumption they would be greeted as liberators, right, this was driven by the way Putin looked out at Ukraine as a country. They had the assumption that they wouldn't require substantial amount of forces to occupy the country, and they didn't think that this war would last more than a week or two. At least that's how much they (planned) (--) organize for serious war.

Part of the reason for that, I think, we know now. Is that a whole (separate part of the) operation was planned by the FSB. And FSB claimed that they could deliver cities, that the Russian military wouldn't have to fight for these cities, and that they would also be able to deliver on the regime change operation (--) Kiev itself. And this whole part of it fell through, except for maybe parts of the south, where it does look like Russian (-) penetration had a at least contributing effect to how quickly they were able to advance from Crimea (--) [18:46].

And so this aspect of the Russian operation, I think, was known but invisible as to what it would amount to and how it would play out in the run-up to the war. It was clear that they were banking on a whole separate operation that was going to (-) to the military effort.

Last point on this. I think we still don't know, obviously, what happened in the meeting room. Sometimes the military is not very honest about what they can and can't do. A lot of times in my experience, the military's very straightforward about what the risks are, and the political leadership doesn't want to hear it. And typically in wars like this, the political leadership has immense war optimism, they have all sorts of assumptions and rationales (--) to the war. And they override a lot of practical military considerations. Do I think that somebody (--) Gerasimov (--) proven himself very well in this war. But do I think (that he) proposed a plan like this? I find that deeply unlikely. If you look at the Russian invasion plan, that

professional military officers would propose this as their first choice, given all the risk, given the clear lack of a plan B, and given the fact that they didn't have the force structure for it, and Putin did not authorize (--) [20:00] mobilization, for an army, there was a partial mobilization army to invade the largest country in Europe, which Ukraine is, outside of Russia. I mean, Ukraine is close to 600,000 square-kilometres in size.

So when you look at it that way, I suspect (that instead) you had the classical (--). Gerasimov and Shoigu essentially nodded along to a plan that I think was very risky. And that the Russian military wasn't necessarily well-positioned to execute, they had to work with whatever the political assumptions were on Ukraine and how the war would go. I don't think (--) lot of options.

And whether they did or didn't, either way, (--) authoritarian system, decision-making declines. People who are competent get replaced over time with people who are loyal. The opportunity to contest things in a room declines over time, right? And you also have not (--) dictator decision-making model, which is the older the dictator in charge gets, the more they tend to misinterpret the sources of prior success, and the worse their decision-making gets over time, and the greater risk they tend to take. And this is very good, this could be a very good example or case study in that broader literature.

Simo Pesu: Yeah, we can't know Russian initial plan for the operation, but that's for sure, the military plans, and it has a host of different type of plans, Russian military considering the Ukraine, and different types of concepts over there. So basically they were not prepared for war with the Ukraine. If we look back in 2014, well, they collected their forces against the Ukraine at those days, but after that, they prepared the border in between Russia and Ukraine. And militarily, they created new forces, they trained them, and they fought a small-scale war inside the Ukraine all the time, for eight years. And they collected quite a lot of experience on that. And they have to have a decent plan, because they built up a force structure able to... firstly, for the defence, and after that, to offensive against Ukraine. It was very (clearly that) [22:16] they were building a force like that. And now, when we are looking at the political decision-making, political, military decision-making, we have the patterns from the 1979 decision-making concerning the Afghanistan, and similarities, as you interpreted these.

But how is it in Russian military doctrinal thinking and thinking about military (-), because obviously they prepared for the offensive against Ukraine, and they did quite a lot of work in that. So how it ended like that, that they didn't – in the end – (fought them) according to their own doctrinal thinking, and according to the training. So (-) what was the main reason behind that (thought)?

Michael Kofman: Look, first you have to periodize the war. And I think that you have the initial invasion, February 24th (--) some respects you have the rest of the war.

(And the most decisive period of this) war is realistically the first five days. That's where a lot of the key things get decided. The Russian military invades in a way that's completely different from the way (--) [23:22] organize the fight. And let's talk about it maybe, if I can distil it into three categories.

First, command and control. If you look at Russian strategic (command) (--) every year, this war, this operation looks nothing like that, in the sense (that military) (--)) strategic command (takes some) forces from the other military (districts) (--) strategic direction. Instead, Russian military has (all four) military districts deploy their commands with their own forces, splits the air force between them, splits all the support between them, (--) command and no (--) initial invasion, OK? Again, (- -) they didn't expect a serious fight. (They structured) (--) more as a regional district occupation force invading than they did as a joint force effort. Who was the individual commander in charge of the initial invasion? Does anybody know? No, nobody does, because there isn't one!

Simo Pesu: Pentti (--).

Michael Kofman: Yeah, OK. (--). And incidentally, I think (--) Ukraine in the way they did previously in '14-'15. (--) prior experience. They had combined staff, and they would divide Ukraine into two separate theatres of military action. And (one assumption) [24:41] could've been that they were going to bisect the country, and then have the different units form, looking at a joint force operation that essentially divided up the theatre. That didn't happen either. So they didn't invade Ukraine in any way that reflected previous operations sort of, if you look at the war starting from 2014. (--) issue one.

Issue two: scaling. The Russian military (--) a war on (this) scale. If we look aside from Afghanistan, because Afghanistan is fought by (--) Soviet army and largely by that army, probably since the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, right, Operation Danube. And by the way, this war, this invasion has strong overtones of Operation Danube – the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. If you look at some of potential (--)) things that might inform Russian decision-making (-).

So you have a (Russian attempt to) scale force employment (--) military power (--) 150,000 troops, (which nobody in the Russian force) had done in many decades, and fundamentally was new to them, if you look at the many (--).

OK, this quickly breaks large parts of the force. (--) communications, right, intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, logistics. They're not organized (--) experience, and they also (--) force. Only part of it is the Russian military (--) [26:05] National Guard that isn't very interoperable with the Russian military. A large part are mobilized units from LDNR – the occupied republics in Ukraine, right? So it's a very (--) sizable part of the (--) regular Russian military.

So they struggle scaling. (And what you find is) they're attempting to do something in a way they don't actually (--). If you look at how the Russian military is invading, it becomes a timetable race of just units racing down roads, trying to meet objectives on timetables. We have a lot of captured (documents, so actually) know a lot about the structure of the Russian military invasion. We know (--). What does that tell you? That they invaded actually thinking of themselves much more as an occupation force, much more than a force that was going to break off the roads (--). Which, in many cases, they didn't, (prepared to fight). Who puts riot police at the head of an airborne formation? (Just being frank about).

So the third aspect of it (--) was the actual force structure. The Russian military was built to be able to generate (--) regiment-size formation. And (it) assumed that if there was going to be a larger war (with a) sustained period of operations over two weeks, that they would have to employ the rest of the force, and that would (--) [27:24] have to be mobilized. Because almost a third of the Russian force isn't there (--) partial mobilization army. (And let's say, almost a third of it) are conscripts, which they (don't wanna use in war). So very quickly, you find that the Russian force is hollow, 'cause a mobilization army that invades (by mobilization) is going to look hollow by definition. And you can't use a third of a force, (because you're) conscripts, right? (So the actual) Russian invasion force for the size of Ukraine is very small.

(--) long answer, but to put all together, the invasion collapses, putting aside (all the wild political) assumptions and Russian machinations behind it, because the Russian military is attempting to do something they haven't done at that scale in a very long time (--) doing it. They're trying to do it with a command-and-control system of organization that's not the way they train and organize to fight at all. And they're attempting to do it with a force that isn't designed for this type of war, and they haven't done the sort of things they would need to have done in order to prepare it for a conflict of this type. (--) [28:29] fundamental breaking of their own doctrinal assumptions of how the force will fight in a war of this kind.

Simo Pesu: It was not a long answer, I would say, if we are looking at how a big power prepares itself for the war. So putting it into this brief package (--).

Pentti, you wanna have a take on the Russian command and how it was organized? In your experiences, how do you feel about that?

Pentti Forsström: Yeah, that is very much (true. I was just) wondering the first thing which Mike was telling about, the leadership and who's the commander, and [laughs] there are perhaps several of them. It really strikes me, surprises me a lot that they took almost a year that they ordered The Chief of the General Staff as a commander, as a force commander in this operation. So what does that mean? And so, to me at least, is that now they really have to take the operation seriously, that's for sure, in very many respects, that they have adapted to the situation in a way that they

should have done in a very first place, if they had planned the operation carefully, as the military used to do or they have trained for ten years at least.

So I'm really expecting something to happen very soon. While now the forces are not... As we have discussed, that the forces are not... The correlation of forces is more or less an equal in both (sides) [30:06]. So there is no superiority in almost in every (sphere of) military influence towards another. But what does the Russia has in their pockets? Does they have any surprises, while they have engaged all the elements what's need to wage a conventional, traditional war against Ukraine at the moment, so -

Simo Pesu: OK, then I think we should go now to the next, the Russian way of adaptation into the war. So, well, (militaries) do prepare in advance for unexpectable, but not in all decisions, it doesn't work like that. So you just have to have reserves, and as you described about the greater power and the latent power it has in its inventory for the longer term.

If you, Mike, look at the adaptation of the Russian, the first plan was clear for few weeks, everything should have been done. After that, Russian KGB way of war would have continued inside the Ukraine. But it didn't work like that: Ukrainians defeated the Russian first attempt. And after that, they adapted. And they adapted in several phases during the war, during this one year.

If you are looking at the adaptation of the Russian, so what kind of doctrinal, structural features of the Russian military and its military thinking, so how did they guided into these adaptations they had? If we try to go over the political side of that, which is evident, naturally, behind this type of decisions.

Michael Kofman: Sure, so let me (--) [31:48] as briefly as I can. I think, in my own view, first and foremost, just reflecting on the first period, I just wanna say that (--)) actually was very close in the early days. In retrospect, I think a lot of folks looking at the initial Russian invasion think that (even the little) mistakes they made (--) that's not the case. Actually, it was quite close in those early days. I think (we're somewhat fortunate) to be living in the timeline that events played out the way they did, people made the choices they did.

But then, afterwards, the Russian military tries (--) redeploys for a campaign to take the Donbas while holding most of the territory they were already occupying. The big problem they have is they're missing a huge part of force structure. First, they lost a lot of their best troops, their best inventory, and a lot of equipment (in the initial) (--). Second, they're (still not allowed to) mobilize, so they don't have a way to replace forces. They don't have a way to rotate units, (they over-deployed) into Ukraine.

Just to give an example, (--) deployed maybe up to 30 per cent of our ground force power. Whereas Russian forces end up deploying, well, 85 per cent, plus, of their units that they had available, so (they've no) capacity for rotation, units will get exhausted over time, and (--) [33:03] manpower, but the Russian military culturally is what? If you look at (--) you also have to understand military culture, right, 'cause military culture will supersede doctrine, especially if the initial plans go wrong, which they often do. Russian military culturally is an artillery army. It is a fires-driven army that uses fires decisively, then exploits it (via manoeuvre) warfare. It is a military where airpower is not used strategically, right, airpower is used for air defence, ground support, and for long-range strikes. So it's a military that (--). So they use artillery and their huge fires advantage to compensate for a lack of manpower (--) they had lost the capacity for manoeuvre. Their force quality was nearly as good as at least I thought or other folks thought at the level of training fundamentals. But more importantly, the part of the force that was good suffered huge losses. At that point, they did pursue a war that's much closer to the way the Russian military trains and organizes the fight, and they got into a grinding battle with Ukrainian forces, and I'll be frank: their strategy, although it expended a lot of what was left of manpower, and they were heavily leveraging mobilized personnel from LDNR to have these fights in the spring and summer.

(The truth is that if it wasn't for the) [34:25] United States and the rest of Western countries coming to Ukraine's aid with intelligence, with ammunition, with equipment, this war might have well had... At least this is my point of view (--) very curious to hear what you think about, might have well had the arc of the Winter War of 1939-1940. The difference is that the United States, and many other Western countries, show up to provide military assistance and support to Ukraine at a point where Ukrainian forces are actually (--), and then the Russian military becomes exhausted, it runs out of momentum, and then, Ukraine's able to go and seize the initiative later that summer and beginning of the fall. Again, with extensive Western military assistance.

If we look at today, (--) podcast, but you know, smart militaries learn from the wars of others and the mistakes of others. If not, then their opponent ends up being their teacher in the war they're fighting. So you see that the Ukrainian military basically is engaged in an iterative cycle of adaptation with the Russian armed forces. The challenges they have right now is the question of whether either military can effectively learn to adapt as an organization, as an institution. (--) lesson that a battalion learns or the lesson that a brigade learns in this fight, will that translate to the rest of the military learning, that lesson (on the) war? Will it stay sort of (--) experience.

The Russian military did not effectively institutionalize key lessons from the war of 2014 and the fighting that had taken place between 2014 and 2022. I think they overly focused on their lessons from their experience in Syria and not enough on the lessons from the fighting in Ukraine, in Donbas.

The Ukrainian military learnt a lot. And there's few opponents as dangerous as ones that you fought before and that you've actually defeated on the battlefield before, because they're very hungry and they spend all their time thinking about you. And the Ukrainian military spent all of its time thinking about how to prevent another Russian invasion, how to fight the Russian armed forces. And they focused all their efforts on Russia. Whereas Russian military spent time thinking about Ukraine, but remained focused on the United States (-) [36:47]. I think that's a fair assessment. (And I actually was, in many respects, not nearly as thoughtful and cognisant) about all the changes (taking) place in the Ukrainian armed forces over that time period.

Simo Pesu: I will go briefly on that Winter War, so at least the foreign listeners, so it might be interesting on that. So basically we have a similar situation here: you have a lot of similarities concerning the Ukraine. So there was 20 years before the Winter War, so that the Finnish military was preparing only for one fight, for 20 years. And the Russians then – Soviets those times – initiated the fight. And they were not fully acknowledged, so what type of resistance there would be. And you might even say that even in Finland, so it was... People didn't fully acknowledge that they have to fight. And our leadership understood that our army is going to fight exactly at that moment when it started the fight at 1939. You never know that beforehand. You have an expectation, but you don't know how it's gonna happen.

Well, Russians were beaten in their first offence during one month. After that, they aggregated forces. At those days, they have (--) [38:05] and they had the reserves, and have everything they needed, so they aggregated the force, big enough, with a mass to go through the Finnish defences. And it started the grinding operation without saving lives or ammunition or equipment: they just went through the Karelian isthmus step by step.

And it ended up so that, after one month of an operation, grinding operations, Finnish military faced the Russian offence from the side, from a frozen sea to a place (--) not prepared defences. And after that, the attrition was that size, so that the Finnish defence and army, which was prepared before the war, was starting to... The attrition (--) level so that we were not fully... We didn't fully know how long we are going to take that.

But for several reasons, so Stalin decided not to continue. And (there was no) [39:14] practical aid or support that would have stopped the Russian military machine. But it was his expectation of strate-, or his strategic consideration made him stop the offence. In the end, it was not anymore the Finnish military. In the beginning, it was that. Basically, we were in similar situation, but Russia had the resources to throw into the problem.

Pentti, do you have (--)?

Pentti Forsström: Yeah, that was more or less the case, and I see, if you change the word Finland to Ukraine, at the moment, it's more or less the same! With the exception that Russian doesn't have, let's say, the ready second echelon or third echelon. They have the potential, yes, they have the potential, and they are more or less prepared to wage a longer war. But then, I really think about that, is the political leadership in Russia, are they really ready to wage a long-term war in a sense? They should have realized at the moment that they won't win. Despite of the end state of this operation, they won't win (--) [40:24] they have lost economically, they have militarily. Their fame and reputation (as counterparties) is lost for... Wouldn't say for good, but anyway, for a long period of time.

And so, I really don't know what happens, but I really expect that they have to make a second wave of mobilization in order to get some kind of military achievement and military victory over Ukraine.

Simo Pesu: Yeah, I think now we go a bit further in our thinking, more speculative terms, so it's the longer term. Russia has a very persistent military culture. And they do have their open borders, they still look at them. And as we are speaking here, so the latent potential of a great power, it exists there still. And they will build up their military according to their own needs again.

But if we look those options or what Russia has to build up its military again for the next war they would be looking after this war. So how would you, Mike, figure out, so what type of... If you want to speculate a little bit, how would you figure out, what type of paths they do have for the future?

Michael Kofman: Yeah, well, hard question, obviously, depends on who's in charge (--) [41:51] what kinda system they have, for a couple of reasons. First, Soviet military really struggled to take the right lessons from World War II, as long as Stalin was still alive, because nobody could discuss Soviet mistakes in World War II while Stalin was alive. It was only after he died that you begin to see a lot of writing by Soviet generals talking about what really happened and how some things played out.

I think this war is actually going to go on as long as Putin's in charge of Russia. I think they are committed to a long war. I think that the Russian strategy in this war at this point is, in some respects, an attritional grind and to exhaust Western material resources, and they probably think that if they can make this a longer war, then eventually Western establishments will be simply out of a lot of military resources (and won't want to) invest in sustaining the war effort. I'm not saying that that's necessarily how it's going to play out, but I think that's the Russian approach.

So this war obviously is going to go on for some time, without knowing how it ends. We're left to speculate as to what the Russian forces will look like. But there's a couple of things (I think we can say) [42:54]. First, the generation that will not shape the Russian military is Shoigu and Gerasimov's generation, (they're both 67), they're

very much on their way out, and their understanding of the Russian military, their interpretation (--) already very clear. The Russian military (was) in some ways a halfway house between the Soviet legacy (--) and what they were attempting to turn it into, and they made a lot of compromises, I think ultimately too many. (--) in terms of how much (--).

OK, Shoigu's and (Gerasimov interpretation from this war is that the) problem with the Russian military isn't that (it was) too Soviet, but that there wasn't Soviet enough. OK? [laughs]. So instead, you see they're pushing in a direction of a mass mobilization army with large amounts of quantity, with older equipment. Formations where force quality isn't as good, but the numbers are there. And the (expansion) of a lot of units under the belief that they can regenerate a Soviet-style military.

This is a dead end, I will tell you, for a couple of reasons, but one of them, I think, stands out to me most prominently amongst others. There's a very simple reason why Russia cannot rebuild a Soviet-style army, and that is because Russia's not the Soviet Union. I lived in the Soviet Union, so I remember what it looked like. It doesn't have the resources of the Soviet Union. It doesn't have the defence industrial base of the Soviet Union. It doesn't have the autarchy of the Soviet Union, the relative autarchy, like, self-sufficiency. OK? And doesn't have the manpower basis either, right? In fact, what Russia's doing in this war is actually spending the legacy of the Soviet Union, its inheritance of equipment and the ammunition, to some extent. After that, it'll have to make hard choices.

The only positive for them is that they will be much less burdened by the Soviet legacy they inherit. You know, strategy (--) [44:38] and you're often burdened by the inertia of the force you inherited and the ideas you inherited, too, (--). So Russia was always burdened by the fact that they inherited this massive Soviet force structure and had to figure out what to do with it.

A good example for that, (let's take), is the airborne. Russia's one of the largest, if not the largest, airborne service in the world. Without the air transportation part (--). What's it for, (it was a separate mechanized) force. Right? A force with its own separate (table of) equipment. A force that represented a higher-end sort of elite infantry (but without) good training for urban combat, as this war reflects. (--) kinda look like this, (what) Russians call a briefcase without a handle, [speaks Russian]. Like, where you get this force and you try to figure out what to do with force structure. Obviously, the airborne doesn't want to (be eliminated as a) service. You don't have a lot of the capabilities that the Soviet Union had to make the airborne a functional force, and you end up using the airborne, as you see in this war, (--) [45:41] more effective or more dependable ground force.

OK. (--) probably is going to do, I think, looking at this war, they might (substantially revise) forces like the airborne and naval infantry, who performed very well, relative to the other units in this conflict. For example, they might expand them, and they

might illuminate the (--) equipment that the airborne, the VDV uses. Because, no offence, driving around on aluminium tin cans (--) proved to be quite ineffective in this type of war. Another thing they might do is (-) the current structure of their aerospace forces, right? The aerospace forces showed that they're not able to engage in dynamic targeting, a lot of the capabilities that they had were simply far too dated to be effective and providing ground support in this war. The part of the force that could provide ground support, Su-25s, dated 1970s aircraft (--) against modern air defence. So I think a lot of Russian aerospace forces, if you look at their performance (--) [46:47] biggest problems.

I suspect the Russian military, after this war, is going to have to make huge choices on whether or not they're going to be still fundamentally an artillery army or if they're going to revisit the balance within the arms of infantry, (armour) artillery.

The biggest thing they were missing in this war, very obviously, is infantry. In fact, they cut infantry from the formations. They visibly lacked (--) infantry. And without mobilization, they ended up looking a lot like the Russian military in Grozny, '94 to '96 actually. A lot of infantry fighting vehicles (--) manpower. I think that's (--). And lastly, what is the composition of this force going to be? For years now, they're going to struggle to get anybody into contract service. So they have to increase the terms of service for conscripts now, as it's still going to be (largely a) conscript military, in the sense that it was a military about a third of which were conscripts (at any) [47:50] given point in time, but that share might increase now again, and they might have to go through another phase, like they did, let's say, during the 1990s, when the contract service component was much smaller. Are they going to now (claim that everybody's in) contract service (--).

(--) this way. One of the biggest challenges they've had (--) the (two-key aspects) of Russian force structure and composition. What percentage of the force will depend on mobilization? Are they going to have (high readiness) or not? And the second is, what percentage of the force will be contract- versus conscript-based?

Simo Pesu: Pentti, you wanna take part in this (-)? You have been watching the Russian military build up from the 1980s, 1990s, and after that, when you look at the Russian military and its options nowadays, so what do you see there, in the future? As we described, so this is highly speculative stuff, so here it all depends on the political side in the end. But what options they basically have, if we look at their culture and resources and (their potential)?

Pentti Forsström: (--) [49:00] very illustrative way of what will happen, especially what comes to the division between conscript service and the contract service, and so, what happens. But I think they really have to realize that the state resources, as Mike said, that it's not the Soviet Union. They really have to realize in practice also what comes to the military. So there won't be any 1.3 million soldiers in the future

Russian military. In paper, yes, definitely, but not in practice, not in (units). It will be much smaller what comes in terms of manpower, that's for sure.

Definitely, what is, I think, very much clear at this point is the nuclear weapons. That Russia, in the light of... as a superpower in their minds and perspectives, they have to rely on that. And they won't give up that element of the military. But what comes to, let's say, the conventional forces, it will be much smaller in size, compared to, let's say, what was the amount of troops two years ago.

Simo Pesu: Thank you, Mike, thank you, Pentti, for your time and for your mind that you opened up a little bit. And I think that (--) [50:23] Russian thinking is facing the realities of the war (and world) at the moment, and we can't just predict it, how it's gonna go. But I think that it's something we will be watching in the future.

And thank you again, Michael, for visiting us. And thank you, all listeners, who went through this long podcast. It's a long war, so making a short podcast out of a long war, it's quite difficult. And for all our students in the National Defence University, I wish you found some new perspectives on this war and the future developments of Russian military and way of war. And I hope you (--) next time. Over and out.

[music]