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The Russian Military: Power and Purpose,

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Surprisingly, Gladwell concludes his book with a story that showcases the negative side of first impressions, thin-slicing, and stereotypes—the impressive increase in the number of women in professional orchestras. This growth, especially in sections of the orchestra traditionally thought of as masculine, is attributed less to a growing awareness of women’s rights than to the introduction of “blind auditions,” in which the applicants perform out of the judges’ sight. Deprived of immediate decision cues, the judges are forced to base their decisions solely on musical merit. Artificial or nonmusical impediments are removed, and women musicians are free to rise to their level of competence. As examples go, this is compelling in the extreme.

The merits of Blink are many. It is well written, lively, and engaging. Gladwell both explains the power of first impressions and demonstrates that there are indeed people who can make very successful decisions based on minimal data in next to no time. He also convinces that such talents can be acquired, or at least improved. Yet it is here that the book loses cohesion and momentum.

Having recognized that “blink” decision making can be both positive and negative, Gladwell offers no clear way by which the former can be improved and the latter minimized. Furthermore, the people he identifies as good “blink” decision makers are all experts. In many cases they have been mastering their fields for decades. For example, General Van Riper’s success was due at least as much to his expert knowledge of U.S. military procedures, strategy, and tactics as it was to his ability to make snap decisions. It is a pity Gladwell did not pursue the question of experience a little deeper as, at least upon the surface, his findings would seem to have applicability to such issues as officer-training pipelines and criteria for command.

The fact that training can reduce the negative impacts of stress in snap decision making is nothing new, especially for those in the military. Whether it is the Marines reacting to a convoy ambush or a warship’s combat systems team responding to an air attack, realistic training is a critical component of success. Gladwell’s work simply reinforces what soldiers and sailors have long known: You fight the way you train.

While Blink will not make its readers experts at snap decisions, it remains a work of interest. For one thing Gladwell rather conclusively demonstrates that our individual personalities, our unique experiences, and beliefs and values, form an integral part of human decision making. Models that fail to take this aspect of decision making into consideration are almost certain to be flawed, and leaders who fail to understand the power of these attributes are almost certain to be disappointed. Blink may not provide all the answers, but the questions it raises are most definitely worthy of consideration.

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The study of the Russian armed forces has, like those armed forces themselves, fallen upon hard times in the contemporary world. Therefore, this study is most welcome. The editors and authors—
Americans, Europeans, and Russians—are all acknowledged experts, so it is not surprising that all the essays are of uniformly high quality. The editors also deserve praise for including a chapter on the defense economy; its evolution is a telling indicator of Russia’s defense policy and overall political economy. The editors’ purpose is to illuminate the conditions under which Russia’s rulers have responded to the challenges for reforming their armed forces. Thus the chapters on defense reform (by Pavel Baev and Alexei Arbatov) and on the military’s sociopolitical conditions (by Alexander Golts) paint a devastating picture of an unreformed military that instead of providing security has itself become a source of insecurity for Russia. That outcome stems from underinvestment, politicization, corruption, official neglect, and refusal to attack the perquisites of the military establishment’s leadership. Vitaly Shlykov’s chapter on the defense economy rightly points out that the regime has failed to break free of either the Soviet Union’s “structural militarization” or the heavy hand of state control. Roy Allison’s overview of Russian military involvement in regional conflicts suggests that even after painful lessons that military has only begun to learn what contemporary warfare is all about. Rose Gottemoeller ably traces both the debate over the role of nuclear forces in Russia’s military structure and policy through 2003 and the implications of that debate as they had been revealed at that point. Dmitri Trenin’s conclusion reassesses the reasons why defense reform had failed through 2003 and addresses the paradox that though many are calling for reforms, many others correctly observe that the system itself is unreformable.

No one interested in tracing the evolution of Russian forces and defense policy through 2003 can go wrong with this book. It is too bad that it was published when it was. Because this work is part of a distinguished multivolume series on Eurasian security issues, its publication was part of a larger program and could not be delayed, but beginning in 2003 and conclusively in 2004, the logjam that had blocked reform began to give way. Defense spending and training, including exercises, increased substantially, and by 2004 the effects were visible. Likewise, new operational and doctrinal principles were introduced and accepted in 2003–2004. The General Staff, which had frustrated many reforms, was now firmly subordinated to the Ministry of Defense, and the chief of the General Staff, General Anatoly Kvashnin, a tenacious bureaucratic operator but disastrous military leader, was finally sacked. Major force-structure reforms began and are still continuing today. Had the authors known of these trends, they could have provided first-class assessments of their significance.

However, some things are already clear. Current reforms are occurring under the rubric of the Russian term “reform of the armed forces”—that is, changes in force structure. These reforms, while extremely consequential, do not constitute a total transformation. Indeed, the defense economy remains too much of a Soviet-like character and is subject to excessive state control. All the armed forces, including those of the Ministry of Interior and intelligence agencies, are unaccountable democratically, representing instead indispensable pillars of
Putin’s neo-tsarist, authoritarian system. In addition, the Ministry of Defense, rather than embracing a professional army, insists upon expanding conscription and enserfing thousands of men as their ancestors were enserfed over a century ago. Thus, until and unless defense reforms are carried out beyond mere reorganizations of the force structure, Russia cannot have effective armed forces, security, or democracy. Until then it will remain tempted by imperialism and military adventurism, as in Chechnya, and fail to retrieve its European vocation or achieve true integration into Europe. Under the circumstances, then, it would be a good idea if the authors could be prevailed upon to write a second edition that incorporates the most recent trends. Then we could derive maximum benefit from this splendid book that was published too soon.

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Mallmann Showell, Jak P. German Naval Codebreakers. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2003. 160pp. $29.95

In the almost thirty years since the public revelation that the Allies in World War II broke substantial portions of the German ENIGMA cipher system, Allied codebreaking has become a staple of our understanding of the Battle of the Atlantic. Less understood are the parallel efforts of the German navy to break Allied naval codes. The historical record of German codebreaking is comparatively fragmentary, many records having been destroyed during or immediately after the war. German naval intelligence was smaller than its Allied counterparts and left a smaller trace. Still, the influence of these German efforts on the pivotal convoy battles of the war has remained an important unanswered question. In German Naval Codebreakers, Jak Showell, author of more than a dozen books on German U-boats, has attempted to provide an account of signals intelligence in the German navy in World War II.

The German Naval Radio Monitoring Service (or Funkbeobachtungsdienst, commonly abbreviated B-Dienst) worked with some success against British and American naval codes. During the early period of the war until 1943, the B-Dienst could read large parts of the Allied merchant ship and convoy codes, which provided important insights into convoy operations and routing. In addition to codebreaking, B-Dienst operated a network of direction finders that fixed the approximate locations of radio transmissions in the Atlantic.

Whatever its success at codebreaking, the German navy in World War II failed at the critical second step of intelligence analysis. Showell creates the impression that B-Dienst personnel were separated from key operational commanders and were not permitted access to information about their own forces’ operations. The B-Dienst was therefore reduced to passing raw messages to senior commands, feeding the complaint that radio intelligence served only to provide a flood of useless information. This arrangement stands in marked contrast to the intimate relationship between commanders and operational intelligence centers in Britain and the United States.