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Strategy and Power in Russia, 1600-1914,

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BOOK REVIEWS

A book reviewer occupies a position of special responsibility and trust. He is to summarize, set in context, describe strengths, and point out weaknesses. As a surrogate for us all, he assumes a heavy obligation which it is his duty to discharge with reason and consistency.

Admiral H.G. Rickover

“A Masterful Job”

Fuller, William C., Jr. *Strategy and Power in Russia, 1600–1914*. New York: The Free Press, 1992. 557pp. \$35

IN WHAT SHOULD PROVE TO BE A SEMINAL WORK, Professor William Fuller of the U.S. Naval War College has probed the interrelationship between political objectives, strategy, and military potential in tsarist Russia. He insists that his book is *not* a comprehensive military history or a treatise on Russian military theory. Nor is it concerned with “strategic culture,” a concept that Fuller finds particularly distasteful. His objection to partisans of this latter approach is that they treat culture as if it were unitary and believe that the definition of a strategic culture will allow prediction. Despite all these disclaimers, however, Fuller not only elucidates key moments in Russian military history but finds a pattern of choice and development that suggests both theoretical and cultural predispositions in Russian history.

Whatever patterns one may discern in Fuller’s study, however, the key to his understanding is that the development of strategies to meet political objectives and the assessment of military potential are matters of judgment and choice, not the predetermined outcomes of culture, geopolitics, or theoretical dogmas. Neither Russia’s strategic past nor its future are foreordained. But an appreciation of the roads taken and eschewed in that past may clarify both the necessity for and the potential consequences of choices in the future. Not only, then, does this book lay the groundwork for his next study on strategy and power in Soviet Russia, but it offers insights into the fundamental dilemmas facing post-Soviet Russia.

A key issue in Fuller’s study is why Russia’s eighteenth-century strategies were so successful in the expansion of Russian power, and its nineteenth-century strategies so deficient. As he notes, in many respects the successes of the eighteenth century magnified the political and strategic problems of the next

century. The enormous expansion of Russia's territories proliferated enemies without and restive populations within. When this geopolitical circumstance is joined with the relative technological and material inferiority of Russia after mid-century, the dimensions of the strategic problem are clear.

Although the security problems of the nineteenth century may have been more severe, the real concern was the adequacy of the Russian regime's response. Fuller argues that earlier there had been a congruence among policy objectives, strategies, and the military systems—a harmony that disappeared as the nineteenth century unfolded. Russia's imperial ambitions throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were enormous, but the nation managed to sustain these ambitions, with a sufficient material base of population and resources and by a shrewd combination of strategy and diplomacy that isolated enemies and reassured other states. Managing the triad of objectives, strategies, and military potential was a remarkably successful conciliar system of decision making initiated by Peter the Great and refined by his successors.

Ironically, Russia's very "backwardness" became a source of strength to the rulers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Serfdom allowed the regime to organize a command system of long-term conscription and to establish within Russian culture a virtually independent military society. At the same time, the poll tax on the peasantry generated the financial basis of the infantry armies. The ultimate victory in the Napoleonic wars confirmed, in the mind of the leadership, the clear superiority of this autocratic system.

Although Russia had a clear interest in playing the role of a satisfied power after the Napoleonic wars, the technological revolution that was moving its putative rivals toward ever greater wealth and military potential drove the Russian leadership toward external adventures to cover its inherent weakness. The defeat in the Crimean War only exacerbated the urgent desire to hide those weaknesses. Fuller views Russian expansion in Central Asia and in Manchuria in the latter part of the nineteenth century as quite unlike the earlier imperialism. In the eighteenth century, expansion was the result of careful planning and preparation, whereas the later expansions in Asia were both reactive and generative of bitter rivalry with Great Britain and Japan. The almost accidental character of Russian strategy in this latter period was exacerbated by the policy apparatus and military organization that developed throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The earlier conciliar system that provided centralized decision making and coordination gave way to a fragmented ministerial system and nearly autonomous military districts. It is little wonder, therefore, that the political objectives of the regime became increasingly contradictory. The ultimate consequence was an inability to discriminate among threats and a mind-set that saw all future conflict as general, rather than local, in character. Under those circumstances, the late imperial regime was gripped by what Fuller calls "strategic pessimism."

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Ironically, even the abolition of serfdom worsened the military weakness of the state. A servile and virtually lifelong draft had created a large and cohesive force, but one that was clearly a separate society. The emancipation of the serfs and the development of a system of universal military service tended both toward the integration of the military with society at large and the development of reserve cadres, but at the cost of introducing into the military all the tensions and divisions of the larger civic culture. At key moments in 1905-1906 and in 1917 this meant that the army was not the unwavering support of the autocracy but itself a fulcrum of social discontent. As Fuller notes, "as was so often the case in Russian history, reform undertaken to strengthen the regime would eventually imperil its continued survival."

Finally, although the late imperial regime saw steady economic growth, the gap, both economically and technologically, between itself and the other major European states, Japan, and the United States yawned ever wider. Its communications and transportation infrastructure, as well as its technocratic culture, were simply insufficient to undertake any major external adventure. Because of this, one would have thought that the tsarist regime would have moderated its ambitions, perhaps engaged in some strategic withdrawal, and sought peace above all else. That it did not opened the way to the tragedy of general war and revolution.

It is always dangerous to draw exact parallels between an earlier historical evolution and present events in Russia. But it is equally clear that Russia's past presents cautionary messages for its current leadership. William Fuller has done a masterful job in elucidating what these messages might be.

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The Soviet Union after Perestroika: Change and Continuity. New York: Brassey's (US), 1991. \$9.95

Presently, it is a common observation among specialists on the former Soviet Union that those who venture to write anything more ambitious than an Op-Ed piece risk seeing their thoughts hopelessly out of date before they appear in print. At first glance the present volume might appear to

confirm that view, especially since the failed coup of August 1991, with all that event portended, occurred just as it was being published.

Such are the uncertainties still surrounding the ruins of Europe's last great empire that many of the questions and answers offered by these authors are as important today as they were when it still appeared that Gorbachev (or his conservative challengers) might yet, through a