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Soviet Naval Theory and Policy

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Robert Waring Herrick

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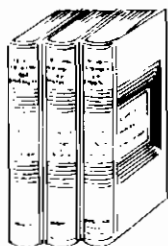
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PROFESSIONAL READING



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

Robert B. Bathurst

Herrick, Robert Waring. *Soviet Naval Theory and Policy*. Newport, R.I.: Naval War College Press, 1988. 318pp. \$9.50 (U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C.)

Applying Isaiah Berlin's brilliant typology from his essay "The Hedgehog and The Fox," we must classify Robert Herrick as a hedgehog, one who ranges narrowly but who knows his territory exceedingly well. Although Soviet military theory and policy emphasize its political subordination and combined nature—there could be no purely naval strategy, it would argue—Herrick plots the stages and development of Soviet naval thought as a subject largely independent of the other services, the Marxist ideology and the savage domestic politics.

There is ample justification for this approach. Interpreting Sovietspeak has meant translating a code with strange symbols and arcane references. If that were not inhibiting enough, there are branches of Sovietspeak requiring specialized interpreters. We need one for the Soviet navy.

For example, when an article in *Military Thought* referred to "successively concentrating superior forces in individual directions," Herrick immediately knew that the German invasion of Norway was being discussed; or, when a naval commentator may call for "selective command of the sea," Herrick

Just as Dr. Herrick, Robert B. Bathurst served both as assistant naval attaché in Moscow and at the Naval War College. He teaches now at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California.

can estimate the degree to which he is testing the power of the ground forces marshals.

Without a guide on this tortuous road, few of us could have made sense of the basic pronouncements, and even fewer of our minds could have continued to function after the massive injections of numbing Soviet prose. Herrick has accomplished the monumental task of establishing the hierarchy of the authorities and the chronology of important pronouncements, the discarding of mountains of chaff, and the cross-referencing and lucid translating of the essential texts. He has done so much of our suffering for us that he has disguised the extent of his achievement.

In *Soviet Naval Theory and Policy*, the author outlines in meticulous detail the dominant themes that emerge from his seminal work published in 1968, *Soviet Naval Strategy*: the search since the Revolution for the correct mix of forces and a correct naval theory for a great scientific and industrial state. The bulk of the arguments, Herrick explains, can roughly be grouped around the "Old School," more or less big-ship Mahanian; the "Young School," more or less near-zone, mosquito fleet, naval guerrilla war, à la Admiral Makarov; or, with neat dialecticism, around the emergent eclecticism of the "Soviet" school.

Herrick's careful survey of the literature is, by itself, an act of dedication and endurance for which all interested in Soviet security studies are indebted. As the Soviet regime grew increasingly estranged from both military and political reality, the prose in which it expressed itself became increasingly bowdlerized and incomprehensible. There was a text, a subtext and a metatext. If the text was about tactical command of the sea, the subtext was about the supremacy of the ground force-dominated general staff in strategic decisions and the metatext was about the Soviet policy of rejecting, for the time being, the export of revolution.

Although aware of the dangers of mirror imaging, Herrick (perhaps subconsciously) organizes the material around three main preconceptions. He has his own subtext in which the Soviets are treated with suspenseful condescension: when, like Americans, will the Soviets admit that they must have an aircraft carrier; when, like us, will their navy understand that it requires "command of the sea;" and when will the Soviet navy be able to assert, in competition with the ground forces, that it is independent and equal? So much of American military analysis is influenced by such preconceptions (that they should be like us) that it is perhaps unfair to single out Herrick's work for special criticism, especially since there has certainly been important evidence for each topic in the Soviet Union. But there is a subtle problem to be faced: that of context.

It is the sad fate of hedgehogs, who like best a narrow range, to be interpreted by foxes, whose seeming superficiality they justifiably resent; but the larger context is the business of a review. And here, that is a problem.

What Herrick has produced is a semiotic study. He has dealt almost entirely with Soviet texts and has chosen to de-emphasize the cataclysmic events surrounding them. The Red terror, Kirov's murder, the slaughter of the military leadership, the fear of U.S. nuclear attack—all recede into the background in a way that invites comparison with Jane Austen's ability to decide the fate of generations in exquisitely described parlors into which no sound of the French Revolution intruded.

Similarly, in Herrick's study the violent events of Soviet history hover far in the background. The justification for such an approach is that there can be a theory of naval warfare abstracted from such concerns as mundane terror. The argument is for Plato versus Gorky, the idealized image without warts. Still, it is difficult to ignore the piquancy of the gladiatorial overtones of the debate, that those whose arguments displeased the dictator were executed, imprisoned or disgraced. Such consequences would surely add depth to the pages of any journal, including this *Review*.

"Aircraft carriers," "command of the sea," and "naval strategy" do not have the same meaning in the Russian as in the American setting, even when the words are the same. In American thought, such ideas are often discussed in the abstract, separate from a larger context like the Maritime Strategy. Russian thought does not normally operate that way, and, in any case, the Soviet state has not had the luxury of being able to do this.

The Russian and Soviet military debates have nearly always had to deal with forces in a "catch-up" position, facing a threat over relatively short distances from nations with a technologically superior base. For the navy, an abstract maritime theory has been nearly impossible. The naval zones, while extensive, are all radically different: what is adequate for the Baltic is insufficient for the Pacific. Thus, an essential part of the Russian debate must necessarily relate to the perception of the threat, the geographical factors involved, the economic constraints, and, more than anything else, the political dictates. (For example, arguing for a big-ship navy became in the early thirties (ex post facto) a Trotskyite deviation with deadly consequences because it implied that the Soviet Union should export revolution and that was a criticism of Stalin.)

As a result, the military debate which appeared on the pages of Soviet periodicals, especially in the thirties and fifties, reflected the shadows in the cave, shadows which flicker in the background of Herrick's study. His next volume, dealing with the Gorshkov years, will suffer less from such contextual complications, for after Stalin's death the prose, while still baroque, became somewhat less Aesopian. The penalty for disagreement was not death; and that introduced a more varied, if less consequential, element into the debates. Secondly, the Brezhnev years were for the military years of comparative affluence, which (coupled with reliable espionage) meant that the Soviets had relatively fewer problems knowing what to plan for. (As we apparently have

no secrets, had they wanted to build the *Eisenhower* they almost certainly could have done it.) And thirdly, the tables had turned. The Soviets could make the West dance to some of their tunes.

We can expect the sequel to this book, then, to be a fascinating study, for the kinds of ships the Soviets built, what they wrote and what action they took was almost certainly the direct result of a world view freed from many of the savage constraints of the pre-Brezhnev years. But without this first volume we would not be in a position to understand the next, especially in this country, where the collective historical memory cannot be expected to reach back more than half a generation. As it is, we can look forward with confidence to having the main texts for a cultural history of formal Soviet naval thought.

Leitenberg, Milton. *Soviet Submarine Operations in Swedish Waters, 1980-1986*. New York: Praeger, 1987. 199pp. \$31.95

Milton Leitenberg has produced an exhaustive account of the continuous series of violations of Sweden's coastal waters by foreign (assumed to be Soviet) submarines which occurred during the first seven years of this decade. The book, however, is much more than simply an annotated chronology of these incursions. Leitenberg enriches his text by examining the domestic and international political contexts within which the operations were construed, and by subjecting every possible explanation of the Soviets' motives to rigorous analysis on the basis of all the available evidence.

Most importantly, the author exposes the contradictions and weaknesses inherent in the Swedish government's policy regarding these submarine operations by consistently and convincingly comparing govern-

ment statements with the acknowledged facts, only to find that the former come up short every time.

One of the book's strengths is Leitenberg's obvious knowledge of the complex workings of Sweden's military and political structures—knowledge gained, no doubt, while he was a research associate at the Swedish Institute for International Affairs between 1979 and 1987. The author's in-depth knowledge of his field is exemplified by the broad range of Swedish military and political sources upon which he draws to illustrate his thesis.

Leitenberg exploits these sources to greatest effect in his discussion of the weakness demonstrated by the Swedish government in the face of overwhelming evidence that the Soviet Union was routinely violating (neutral) Sweden's territorial waters and had on occasion sent submarines deep into the heart of her most important naval bases. This aspect of the submarine crisis is documented so