Naval War College Review

Volume 27
Number 1 *January-February*

Article 7

1974

Crisis Mentality: A Problem in Cultural Relativity

Robert B. Bathurst

Follow this and additional works at: https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review

Recommended Citation

Bathurst, Robert B. (1974) "Crisis Mentality: A Problem in Cultural Relativity," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 27 : No. 1 , Article 7.
Available at: https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol27/iss1/7

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

Both the United States and the Soviet Union face the world, and therefore each other, strong in the belief that they possess a monopoly on righteousness. Each feels the power of moral imperative. Similarly, each seeks to resolve problems in terms of its own limited philosophy. In any given crisis the superpowers are likely to possess the same empirical data but, because of intuitive, culturally determined factors, arrive at different estimations of the situation. If this inability to correctly perceive the intent or objectives of one's opponent is attached to the question of: When will the other side fire? the problem becomes serious indeed.

CRISIS MENTALITY:

A PROBLEM IN CULTURAL RELATIVITY

Prepared from some remarks given at the Current Strategy Forum

by

Captain Robert B. Bathurst, U.S. Navy

In reaction to any perceived crisis in U.S. security, the currently most favored pattern of action is, whenever possible, to send an aircraft carrier to the vicinity of the disturbance. In turn, the Soviet reaction tends to come in the form of a missile cruiser stationed within range of our aircraft carrier. While these have become precedents and perhaps conditioned responses, such calm acceptance of military reality was not always the case. When the Soviet naval buildup in the Eastern Mediterranean forced new tactical realities upon us in the Jordan crisis in 1970, we had no planned reaction. We have since learned to expect Soviet missile tubes trained on our ships nearly anywhere in the world where the state interests of one or the other power are sufficiently involved. Inevitably, our initiative in foreign affairs is affected by that expectation, and our tacticians have had to adjust their plans accordingly.

The question which repeatedly presents itself is: Under what circumstances might one of the adversaries fire? A review of recent history suggests that U.S. analysts have a disturbing probability of arriving at the wrong answer.

Perhaps the two most flagrant examples of this miscalculation are invasions having taken place to our almost total surprise: into Czechoslovakia in 1968 and into the Sinai in 1973. We have been through a sobering lesson in the reevaluation of the Soviet interpretation of détente brought about by the planning, supply, and diplomatic support given the Arab attack against Israel. Indeed, the history of our calculations about the missions and functions of the

Soviet Navy since the 1950's, and thus its likely weapons program, now seems very limited and naive.

What we have witnessed is the skillful application of cover and deception, conditioning, and very long-range integrated planning. Furthermore, the scale of its application suggests that these have not been localized military demonstrations of tactical principles, the issue, as some would have it, of service jockeying for funds and missions. Rather they were the result of state plans and policy requiring high-level support and cooperation.

As the Israelis learned, although they hardly needed the lesson, in modern war you do not *get* ready. You have to be ready. That two large-scale invasions could take place without advance warning, in spite of the extraordinary sophistication of means of surveillance, should sober and frighten every political and military leader as nothing since World War II has done. If one attempts to put this in the proper perspective with a review of Soviet military literature which emphasizes that the outcome of a successful battle under modern conditions will be heavily influenced by surprise and readiness, one concludes that both invasions were successful applications of widely held doctrine.

The extraordinary paradox of these two invasions—and the one which this paper seeks to illuminate—is that the two events took the world by surprise, even though attention was focused on them. This suggests that there is a problem of comprehension going well beyond the mere technical identification of indications on the imminence of hostilities. The problem obviously involves mass psychology and conditioning—the misreading of the indications took place on a grand scale. The checks and balances which are assumed to be introduced by multiple readings and opinions did not appear to counter the force or power of conventional or popular wisdom.

Though Pavlov did not prove it in his laboratory, success in conditioning the subject also conditions the experimenter. He repeats techniques that prove his thesis. The Soviet military have now shown how to successfully use force in limited engagements in international disputes.

In 1968, as the Dubcek government opted for increasingly liberal reforms and the Soviet Government extracted more frequent testimonials of solidarity with the Warsaw Pact, it became clear that the problem might be solved with the same method used in Hungary in 1956. The U.S. Government established various watch committees where position papers were written and intentions were predicted. There was no lack of awareness.

Those who analyzed the situation fell, not irrationally, into two camps: those who thought there would be an invasion and those who thought that, on balance, there would not be an invasion. It is quite important to make it clear that nearly everyone conceded that the Soviets *might* invade. The situation, however, was a hypothetical one in which only a yes or no answer was valid. No qualifications were permitted.

Unfortunately, there is little actual record of the positions and opinions of that time, and the problem, in any case, is not to make lists and arrive at percentages. It is rather to describe the climate of opinion, the environment, the hunches, and intuitions out of which more concrete positions and eventually policy evolved. Anyone who has been in the bureaucratic policy-making environment knows that few forceful and definitive positions are taken until certain experts or seniors or groups have expressed themselves. It is then that a conventional wisdom begins taking shape that eventually obliterates dissent. At that stage of the deliberations, the majority of those involved, when forced to take one side or the other, believed that the Soviets would

not invade. Furthermore, this group tended to include the more senior, and therefore, the policymaking echelon.*

Among their arguments, the strongest were that: (1) Soviet security was not threatened (an argument which the Dubcek government repeatedly supported); (2) a brutal show of force would set back the cause of communism; (3) Rumania had increasingly asserted its independence without being threatened; (4) the Soviet Government in the post-Stalin period had mellowed; (5) Soviet leaders, being better educated, were less likely to use force; (6) in satisfying rising consumer expectations within the Soviet Union, the Soviets needed Western support, which implied détente.

These were all perfectly rational, reasonable, and supportable arguments. They were repeatedly advanced in one form or another in classrooms and lecture halls where Soviet foreign policy was discussed. As such, they developed the force of standard arguments, reappearing in a variety of contexts whenever attention focused on the Soviet Union.

Those who held the belief that the Soviets would invade had a difficult time making their case persuasive. On the whole they agreed with the rational arguments cited above, yet felt that, contrary to common belief, the Russians did feel their security threatened and that the Communist cause would not be materially hurt by using force. The thinking of most analysts was, however, dominated by the rational and reasonable arguments—after all, the Soviets had more to lose than to gain by an invasion—and was sufficiently conditioned by periodic Warsaw Pact maneuvers to see little threat in the buildup of Soviet tanks.

*The author, in the absence of any useful data, takes full responsibility for this statement. It is the result of his observations and those of colleagues and desk officers involved in the problem at that time.

Both groups were exposed to the briefings and opinions of experts in a setting common in cases of high tension with extreme consequences in which a clear, logical, brilliant briefing is given explaining why the Soviets would invade followed by an equally brilliant briefing on why they would not invade. The policymaker, who had felt decisive prior to this exposure, may tend to develop misgivings about his own conclusions.

The fundamental basis for the disagreement of those predicting the invasion was not rooted just in factual data but also in an emotional understanding of the Soviet policy. Many of them had experience in the Eastern bloc and had the additional dimension of Soviet cultural feelings about security. They could filter the data through one additional sieve, the Soviet point of view.

The speed of modern warfare, the destructiveness, and the equilibrium in the balance of power force us to concentrate on intentions and therefore the gray world of psychology. The contest between an aircraft carrier and a missile cruiser, a submarine and a destroyer, and, ultimately, one ICBM system and another is likely to be decided by the question of who fires first. The speed of missiles permits no time for succeeding stages of readiness or for the analytical development of countertactics on the battlefield or at sea. The timing in the contest between an Egyptian Styx missile and an Israeli Gabriel is a matter of miliseconds.

The problem in predicting intentions—a problem that all political and military leaders in the superpowers cannot now avoid—is that the application of rational faculties alone will not give us the correct answer. In fact, dependence on a purely rational analysis devoid of any appreciation for cultural relativity seems to promote an arrogance that leads to disastrously wrong answers. The problem in discussing these psycho-

logical and emotional elements, however, is that they are not subject to precision or quantification. Yet, serious decisions, possibly cataclysmic decisions, are and will be made on the basis of them.

The role of intuition and inner conviction in making decisions certainly needs to be explored.* The problem is serious. After the leader is given the briefings and computer read-outs, he has to answer "will they" or "won't they." That decision will probably be made on the basis of what in America would be called a "gut reaction." Those who make decisions on a high level have, quite rightly, developed a faith in their "gut reactions." They think—and empirical evidence appears to support this—that they have achieved positions of power over their equally qualified colleagues on the basis of generally correct intuition. However, a problem develops when these decisionmakers—who have risen to their positions on the basis of actions taken within the context of their own culture—are suddenly faced with intercultural problems. It is then that their "gut reactions" are likely to arrive at a faulty conclusion through the inadequate digestion of data available.

When the Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, returned from Moscow where he had successfully negotiated a cease-fire in the Middle East, he spoke of the historic responsibility of both powers to preserve peace. Both powers certainly recognize such a responsibility, but the kind of actions which each side feel are necessary to fulfill that responsibility, and thus the point at which one or the other might "squeeze the trigger," are often very different indeed. Let us examine them.

Contrary to American practice, the Soviets refer their decisions to the authority of a deterministic philosophy. In their interpretation of the historical process, the dialectic has established that the world proletariat will resolve all class conflicts. The Soviet Government, firmly controlled by the Communist Party, sees itself as the prime defender and interpreter of that historical process. Indeed, the very legitimacy of Soviet leaders is derived from their ability to make correct and loyal Marxist-Leninist deductions. They therefore experience the weight of a moral and historical imperative. No one can propose policy, write reports, present briefings, or even interpret events without reference to that general philosophy.*

In their view, imperialists, led by the United States, are obstructing the process of history—an unjustified and, in the end, hopeless undertaking. There is, therefore, a moral obligation to generations unborn to block this regressive policy and to advance the historical process. In fulfilling the exalted dictates of history, all methods are justified—morality is a cultural and class concept, not a historical one. In addition to the usual military and diplomatic tactics, blackmail and deceit are useful and justified. Force is obviously necessary and inevitable. History has, within the Soviet Union, already justified the liquidation of whole classes and nationalities. Would it show mercy during the liquidation of regressive nations?

These feelings, in a broader sense, have not been created by Marxism alone but are equally derived from and are culturally reinforced by the strong romantic, religious, and national sentiments toward the role of "Holy" Russia in preserving a kind of "purity" and

---

*Though by what methodology, the author, who apologizes for his own lack of it, does not know.

*The force of this ideological umbrella is strangely underrated in the United States. To understand a fraction of its power, one only has to recreate the atmosphere in the United States at the height of the McCarthy period. Who in Government would have dared to propose recognizing China or aiding the Soviet Union agriculturally and technically?

finding the way for the salvation of mankind.

The United States, too, sees itself as the servant of history by protecting the rights of free peoples to determine their own destiny. We too have a moral obligation to all mankind. Therefore, as Henry Kissinger pointed out, while we recognize our responsibility to maintain peace, there is a point at which we would be obliged to fire in a confrontation with the Soviets.

That "point" marks, of course, the future Armageddon. How can it be defined precisely? It is not a rational or mathematical measurement. It will not be decided by democratic processes. Yet, from the general acceptance of at least the reality of that point, it seems to embody a concept about which there is a kind of consensus.

The Soviet and American ways of looking at the world have at least one similarity—a historical, Messianic vision. In each case the vision provides a moral justification for violence, and in each case it provides guides to action which are in with the dictates of the opposing system. Under these circumstances détente can never be more than a temporary tactic for either side.

The Soviet Government is quite emphatic about its philosophical system and its view of events in terms of their contribution to the fulfillment of a preordained order. Having such a view of reality, the Soviet Government operates with considerable consistency. How then do we conclude that "this year" the Soviets will not invade Czechoslovakia?

Our difficulty in understanding the dictates of so all-encompassing an ideology is deep seated, at least among naval officers. Each visit by a head of state, each evidence of cooperation on some cultural or economic level lends itself to the desired interpretation that now we will be friends. Obviously there is a temptation to conclude that the individual, temporal manifestation of understanding proves the invalidity of the domination of ideology.

This recurring need to ignore or translate this hostile philosophy into a comfortable and friendly concept or a practical application is characteristic of the American experience and our philosophy. Pragmatism, a belief in testing truth by clearly visible results and which understands "thought" as primarily a guide to action, is a respected philosophy which evolved in America and appears to express the American spirit and analytical approach. Our foreign policy, our military strategy, and our economic life are often justified on the basis of pragmatism. When we make appeals to "the reasonable thing to do," it is most often the pragmatic philosophy that provides us with the standard of validity with which to define the reasonable.

Pragmatism, however, tends to distort any understanding of a deterministic philosophy such as Marxism-Leninism. For example, the pragmatist might expect that once a Marxist has seen how efficiently our agricultural system operates, he will return to the Soviet Union and recommend decollectivization. The philosophical bias recognizes only that an ideology which does not produce practical results should reasonably be discarded. Such reasoning was massively publicized during the Khrushchev visit to the United States.

The pragmatist, then, would be likely to overrate the force of facts in Soviet decisions. The Soviets, on the other hand, would be likely to exaggerate the force of America's economic drive (a desire to dominate world markets, for example) as the motive force in its foreign policy.

There is even a different perception of time operating which may suggest to one side that there is a crisis when the other side does not think so. For the Marxist, as for the Slavophile before him, history has decreed the ultimate triumph. History has not given assur-

ances that the path will be smooth with one inevitable success following another. Immediate results are neither expected nor required. Errors can be absorbed. The Cuban missile crisis, the expulsion from Egypt, and similar events are only illustrations of Lenin's phrase "two steps forward and one back." The timetable for the spread of communism is flexible to the extreme.

The pragmatist, however, is in a hurry for results and intellectually embarrased by failure. Time does not guarantee him a remission of sins. In order to know the truth, he must test it through action, translate a plan into practice, and demonstrate its positive value. His tendency, because of the pressure of time and the need to act, to test this data, is to arrive at hasty conclusions. From the Soviet point of view, he overreacts, manufactures crises where none exist.

Our time sense is certainly exacerbated by our rhythm of life. In our careers, time is money. Military personnel are geared to 2- or 3-year tours, and an aggressive, ambitious officer must make his mark quickly if he is interested in speedy promotion. The politician operates within a 4-year time frame, and the necessity of concrete results pressures the whole gamut of government employees working in foreign or domestic policy. There is a sense of impatience and urgency about problem solving which a Soviet officer probably does not share.

These cultural and, in our case, pragmatic and practical misconceptions color military decisions at every level. In naval analysis it is argued that the Soviets decided to build certain ships during specific years on the basis of *our* practical experience; because Soviet ships are sailing the world's oceans, it is argued that they have adopted *our* naval strategy of control of the seas as though they had just discovered Mahan, it is asserted that the Cuban missile crisis taught the Soviets the value of seapower, although Soviets, and before them Czarist Russians, had been writing and theorizing about it for decades.

It is difficult to comprehend the ability of preconceptions to obscure facts, even when they are striking. One example is the Styx missile. First appearing in 1959, it revolutionized naval tactics. Heretofore navies were rated on the basis of the number of bottoms and the size of ships. With the advent of the surface-to-surface missile, a small, fast boat could carry more firepower than a cruiser. The whole concept of naval tactics should have changed. And yet, it was not until 1967, when a Styx sank the Israeli destroyer *Eilat*, that this new development began to be taken with the seriousness it deserved. Perhaps this is because the pragmatist, concentrating on current problems and practical results, has difficulty shifting his attention to a general principle. Patterns that succeeded are repeated, and concentration is attracted to ever more detailed improvements. In the case of the Styx, since the immediate threat could be overcome by an F-4 launched from an aircraft carrier, the overall implications for naval warfare were, for a very long time, ignored.

On the other hand, the Soviet officer, protected by the movement of history, tends to see the world and foreign cultures as striving for uniformity. Details of national differences are blurred. Egyptian pride and Moslem religious fervor are difficult to understand in the light of the promised victory of the proletariat.

The danger is that the American, concerned with minute improvements in the operation of the carrier task force, will not notice that the Soviets have resolved the whole issue of the aircraft carrier. On the other hand, the Soviet officer, satisfied with the overall solution to a specific problem, will tend not to think of the variations in behavior which might temporarily obstruct that solution.

In order to test truths and examine practical results, the pragmatist tends to be bound by artificial categories which he has established for experimental purposes. The navy fights its wars without reference to the army or air force; sea lines of communication begin to take on distinct mental outlines as if they existed as permanent highways through the water; and ingenious improvements will be proposed in the operations orders for the resupply of NATO by sea although the total concept may no longer be valid.

The Soviet officer, in making decisions, will assume the overriding nature of ideological interest which insures the cooperation and support of other branches of the armed forces. Of course, there will be interservice jealousies and rivalries, but he would not think of planning a major strategy without reference to the participation of all elements of the military, the government, and the party. Since the dynamics of history are moved by universal laws, military, economic, political, diplomatic, and cultural action all merge into one another and are, at once, an expression and means of realizing the same end. As distinctions between civil, political and private society fade, so do distinctions between national and class interests.

The man of action is, almost by definition, easily conditioned. Since he finds fulfillment in acting and in achieving demonstrable results, he cannot resist responding to a stimulus. He is attracted by patterns and not ideologies. Annual Soviet naval exercises are contrasted and compared only with previous ones. Warsaw Pact exercises are minutely annotated. At first a new development may be watched cautiously, even reacted to, but once sufficiently repeated, such developments are accepted as normal. Missile submarines in Cuba, intelligence collectors off Norfolk, multiple ship declarations for Bosporus transits, all, once accepted, fail to cause alarm.

A knowledge of this reaction—the inability of man to keep constantly on the alert—is useful for military cover and deception. Conditioning, which gives one side the added benefit of training, also softens the opposition for the real thrust. Conditioning can proceed on another level as well. By interpreting every action as a manifestation of a reasonable and practical need judged by one's own standards—one loses all hope of accurately estimating the action of another, since the projection is merely one's own culture, one's self.

If it seems absurd that a modern nation could pursue an "irrational" policy or that a whole people could support "irrational" action, one only needs a short review of recent history. The Nazi madness or the Soviet purges of the thirties when the Soviet equivalent of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was solemnly reported to have been agents of Japan, England, or Czechoslovakia provides enough evidence to sober the

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY

Capt. Robert B. Bathurst, U.S. Navy, did his undergraduate work in psychology at Northwestern University, earned a master's degree in English literature from Northwestern, and is a Ph.D. candidate at Brown University. He has had Russian language training at the Naval Language School in Washington, D.C., and attended the U.S. Army Advanced School of Slavic Studies at Oberammergau, Bavaria. As an intelligence officer, he has served in the Fleet Intelligence Center, Europe, as Head of Political Military Affairs, as Assistant Naval Attaché in Moscow, and as Deputy Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence for Commander in Chief, U.S. Naval Forces, Europe. Captain Bathurst currently occupies the Edwin T. Layton Military Chair of Intelligence at the Naval War College.

most skeptical. Indeed, the Soviet preparation for World War II consisted of liquidating a majority of the military, government, and industrial leaders and then launching an attack on Finland.

The question remains: Who will shoot first and at what point? The question is far from answered, and the methodology for finding that answer is not even suggested. What this paper has tried to show is that the qualitative change in modern warfare has necessitated an overwhelming requirement to examine and improve the estimative process. We have been warned twice that we could be surprised. We have become accustomed to situations in which one or the other power might feel morally obliged to fire. The point at which that decision is made will be intuitive, culturally determined, and made to the roll of a different drum.

. . . It is an amiable and common conceit that one's own behaviour is better than that of one's opponent, and it may even be true upon occasion. What is absurd is that we should expect an enemy to base its military policy on our own estimate of our own moral character.

P.M.S. Blackett, "A Critique of Defence Thinking," Encounter, April 1961