



RED AIR

POLITICS IN RUSSIAN AIR POWER



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Dr. Sanu Kainikara

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Red Air:
Politics in Russian Air Power

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For
Pranati 'Manju' Kainikara
My constant and loving companion
through an ongoing eventful journey





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This book is a slightly modified version of a doctoral thesis that I submitted for the award of a PhD in 2005. As all research students find out sometime or the other through their toils, the hill looks insurmountable at times and the spirit to get down to work flags. It is in these times that encouragement from the most unlikely sources gives you the gumption to go on and restores your confidence. I have had a few such occasions.

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Sanu Kainikara

Canberra

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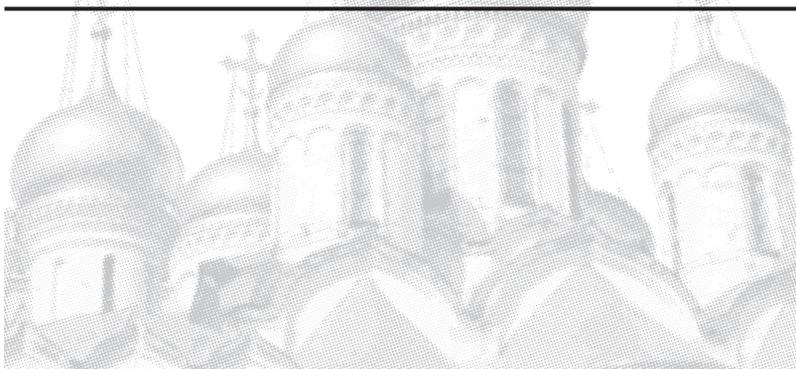
INTRODUCTION





Soviet military, as an integral component of the Communist Party, was the embodiment of the creation, sovereignty and stability of the Soviet Empire. By ensuring the security and stability of the nation state, the Armed Forces contributed to the sustainment of socialism and by covert involvements in fostering armed revolution in some instances, they encouraged the spread of the idea of communism. There is a deep-rooted relationship between ideology and warfare in Soviet strategic thinking, based to a great extent on Lenin's personal interpretation of Clausewitzian ideas. Soviet military power and doctrine therefore, cannot be viewed apart from Soviet economic and political power and has to be seen as an extension of Soviet ideology.

Throughout its history, Soviet ideology has considered the Army as the basic arm of defence, with the Air Force being an essential but subservient component. This secondary status of the Air Force, as a support arm of the Army, resulted in a desultory doctrine development process mainly stemming from ideological influence that gave the Army primacy of place.



“We can assert it with confidence that any state that does not possess a strong, properly organised, well trained and prepared air fleet is doomed to defeat.”

Mikhail V. Frunze¹

The intellectual basis for Soviet/Russian military thought, the fountainhead for the development of doctrine, has not always been clearly explained nor is it an easy task to do without meandering. The events of the last century and its impact on the military are difficult to catalogue exclusively with no omissions or commissions. In the Soviet Union, ideology remained a critical determinant in the formulation of military policy and Marxism-Leninism the official basis for the identification of the ‘threat’ against which the military was designed and structured to fight. The Soviet military was never outside the influence of strong political ideology and evolved in the way it did purely because of overpowering ideological influences on its doctrinal and strategic development.

The current Russian Air Force claims the mantle of the erstwhile ‘Red Air Force’ of the Soviet Union as its logical successor. Under these circumstances the Russian Air Force can lay claim to a long and illustrious history backed by grand traditions and customs. Through out its history, the Soviet Air Force has always delivered the required support to the armed forces and the Russian Air Force continues to do so even today under extremely difficult politico-economic circumstances. This fact alone speaks volumes about the resilience of the force that is in the throes of reform and reorganisation while beset with grave threats emanating from extraneous factors. Indeed, after nearly fourteen years of its ‘new life’, the Russian state remains an uncertain proposition with shaky economic foundations and is still in the process of redefining and refining its social structure. The best chances that it had for overhauling the military with minimum



effort were in 1992 and then again in 1996 but both these reform opportunities were not completely utilised. Historically, the Soviet military reaction to reform has always been slow and cautious, yet once it had been embarked upon, the military has been known to carry it forward with some success. Based on this historical precedent and considering that, to a large extent, the Russian military carries the same ethos as the Soviet military, the slow progress of the current reform cannot as yet be considered a failure.²

Currently the military is looked upon as a stabilising influence within the nation that is trying to come to terms with the traumatic collapse of the erstwhile USSR and only now emerging in its own right. Russia is still not out of the doldrums, nor is the Russian Air Force in a state to conduct uninterrupted operations in support of government policy, but it is in the best shape amongst the three armed forces to be able to lend credence to the Russian Federation's claim to international influence and power projection.



Doctrine is very much a reflection of a nation's character and influences the structure, decision-making process and employment concepts of a force and dictates its entire *modus operandi*.

Military doctrine typically deals with a broad spectrum of military issues ranging from the strategic to the operational and tactical levels of warfare. At the strategic level military doctrine establishes the principles that guide the design of military force structure and operations. Its crucial importance lies in its role as the connecting link between defence policy and national strategy on the one hand and the operational plans of the armed forces on the other.³ National strategy is in other words the national security policy, which is sometimes referred to as 'grand strategy'. The term 'military doctrine' is applied to that sub-component of grand strategy that deals explicitly with military means.⁴

Doctrine is very much a reflection of a nation's character and influences the structure, decision making process and employment concepts of a force and dictates its entire *modus operandi*.⁵ Air



power doctrine is dependent on a number of factors and the strategic culture of the nation has an important role to play in its formulation. Nowhere else is this more apparent than in the case of the Russian Air Force. Air power is also the most flexible of force projection capabilities and even this truism is borne out by the transformations that the Russian Air Force has undergone in its history. The inherent flexibility of the concept of air power itself has been demonstrated in no uncertain terms by the stalwart nature of the Russian Air Force.

After the Bolshevik Revolution, the Imperial Air Force was built up again, initially as an 'Air Fleet' and then as an independent Air Force. The change in name did not however, bestow a clear independent doctrine on the Air Force but changes were instituted in a lackadaisical manner, with new doctrine and tactics being imposed even before the earlier change had taken effect. During the Second World War, the Soviet Air force made up in numbers what it lacked in tactical appreciation. The performance of the Air Force was almost completely dependent on personal proficiency of the pilots because both doctrinally and technologically very little consideration was given to optimising the employment of air assets. There was no clear understanding or analysis of the impact of strategic bombing and it is also reasonable to believe that the decision-making bodies, the Councils, had almost no knowledge regarding the conduct of aerial warfare. The Councils were all made up of party members with almost no participation from the professional military cadre. Knowledge and understanding of the conduct of an aerial campaign was non-existent in these Councils, much to the long-term detriment of the Soviet Air Force. The main reasons for the poor performance was the lack of efficient command and control system and the auxiliary status of the air force as a purely support arm of the army. These drawbacks had been realised during the Winter Campaign in Finland in the early part of the Second World War, and measures were instituted to overcome them. These initiatives however, did not come to fruition before the German invasion. Total emphasis was given to the support of army formations and in the initial phases of the war the German *Luftwaffe* were able to have virtually uncontested air superiority.

The strategic circumstances changed considerably after the Second World War as the Soviet Union emerged as the only



power with the perceived capacity to challenge the ascendancy of the United States. The emergence of nuclear weapons added impetus to the building of the strategic air force as a delivery system. Simultaneously fighter aircraft design and development also started in earnest, mainly because of the ideological thrust to project Communism and the Soviet model as the ideal for world order. Development of tactical air forces was forced by the limited wars that were fought in the Middle East and Asia where the use of strategic air forces was not warranted.

By closely following the example of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), the Soviet Union built up an air force with global power projection capabilities while giving further attention to improving air combat capabilities of the force. In the area of aircraft manufacture, the maturing of design capabilities was demonstrated by the fielding of the MiG-29 'Fulcrum' and the Su-27 'Flanker' fighter aircraft that have been acknowledged as superior in design and performance to any other contemporary aircraft.

Throughout its history, the Soviet ideology has always considered the Army as the basic arm of defence with the Air Force being an essential but subservient component. The overriding concern therefore has been the availability of adequate air support to the ground forces. This secondary status of the Air Force as a support arm of the army resulted in a desultory doctrine development process, mainly stemming from ideological influence that gave the Army primacy of place. Analysis also reveals that the majority of generals in the Soviet higher command structure were army officers with very limited understanding of air power issues. The underlying principle of operation for any campaign was for an inexorable forward movement of the army with the air force purely in support of army objectives. The concept was based on the Soviet willingness to accept unnaturally heavy casualties in order to capture ground at a fast pace, thereby denying the NATO forces the opportunity to recoup after the initial engagement. In this concept of operations, the capture of enemy airfields was also envisaged and therefore, it was assumed that the accompanying air elements would be able to use these fields to support further forward movement of the army. This was the cardinal reason for the Soviet Tactical Air Forces lacking range and weapon carrying capability when compared to



Western standards. Design of aircraft was completely influenced and shaped by the ideology that supported a strategy of physically overwhelming the enemy lines of defence on the ground.⁶

Soviet military, as an integral component of the Communist Party, was the embodiment of the creation, sovereignty and stability of the Soviet Empire. By ensuring the security and stability of the nation state, the Armed Forces contributed to the sustainment of socialism and by covert involvements in fostering armed revolution in some instances they encouraged the spread of the idea of communism. The relationship between ideology and warfare in the Soviet strategic thinking was almost completely influenced by Lenin's personal interpretation of Clausewitzian ideas. Soviet military power therefore, cannot be viewed apart from Soviet economic and political power and has to be seen as an extension of Soviet ideology. Official ideology was critically important in the formulation of doctrine and the allocation of resources for the military.

Being an integral part of the Communist Party, the civil-military relationship in the Soviet Union was completely different from Western standards. The basic function of the Party, and by extension the military, was to ensure the progress of the international class struggle, eventually overcoming the bourgeois international order. It was therefore imperative for the military to support the ideological advances that were planned and for ideology to be all-pervasive in the doctrinal development of the military.

A potent military force cannot however, be built purely by a combination of political will infused with ideology and the unlimited allocation of resources. It also requires a favourable external environment, healthy national economic performance and stable domestic and international relationships.⁷ The primary aim of the Russian Armed Forces has now become optimising the military structure and eliminating all the risks of disintegration. Achievement of this objective will automatically restore the military's capability to project power externally. Russian leadership seems to be genuinely committed to reorienting the military and withdrawing from unilateral deployments outside its borders. By gathering military resources together it will be possible to streamline the reform process and thin down the structure without losing quality. The need of the hour is to 're-centralise' control over

power bases that have sprung up in the past decade both within the military and the military-industrial complex, in order to make these security providing elements compatible and complementary. The reforms are evolving in the direction of cutting down unilateral engagements and catching-up in the global technological revolution currently under way.

The subsequent chapters examine the Soviet/Russian concept of air warfare, with particular emphasis on the development of air power doctrine, leading to a deeper understanding of the relationship between doctrine and ideology. They focus on analysing the changes that have taken place in the doctrinal approach to air power, in the Soviet context, primarily in the post-Second World War era. However, it also gives a historical perspective to the development of air power in the Russian context.

The analysis will also shed some light on generic air power capabilities so that its doctrinal developments and the progression of its strategic application can be better understood. To a certain degree the book is inter-disciplinary in that it compares and combines ideas from purely political ideology to strategies of military forces while examining some aspects of military history. As a result, the coverage and consultative literature is far broader than would have been the case in a more narrowly focussed study.



A potent military force cannot be built purely by a combination of political will infused with ideology and the unlimited allocation of resources. It also requires a favourable external environment, healthy national economic performance and stable domestic and international relationships.

There are two underlying themes that are followed throughout this book. First is the historical insight that provides a chronological thread to the developments that took place within the Soviet Air Force in response to external stimuli mainly from the political arena. The second deals more in the realm of ideas and concepts of air power and catalogues their development while analysing their interface with the ideological development of the state.



The chapters enumerate doctrinal developments chronologically in a historical perspective and therefore give certain continuity to the analysis of the intertwining and complex relationships between political ideology, military doctrine and concept of operations.



NOTES

- ¹ Mikhail V. Frunze, *Izbrannye proizvedeniya* (Selected Works), Vol 2, Moscow, 1957, p. 328.
- ² A Kokoshin, *The Soviet Strategic Thought, 1917-1991*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, 1998, p. 36.
- ³ Ariel Levite *Offence and Defence in Military Doctrine*, West View Press, San Fransisco, 1989, p. 10.
- ⁴ Sanu Kainikara, *An Air Power Doctrine for Regional Air Forces*, BDM Services Ltd., Fairfax, VA, 1997, pp. 2-3.
- ⁵ Major General Waldo D. Freeman, USAF, 'The Challenges of Combined Operations', *Military Review*, November, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle, PA, 1992, p. 7.
- ⁶ Sanu Kainikara, 'Russian Combat Aircraft: Concept of Operations and Future Employment', Keynote Address in *Proceedings of the Air Warfare Conference 1999*, RAAF Base, Williamtown, Australia, June 1999, Canberra: Defence Publications, 1999.
- ⁷ Pavel K. Baev, 'Russia's Military – The Best Case', in Ina M. Sygne, (ed), *Putin's Russia-Scenarios for 2005*, Jane's Special Report, Jane's Information Group, Surrey, UK, 2001, p. 41.



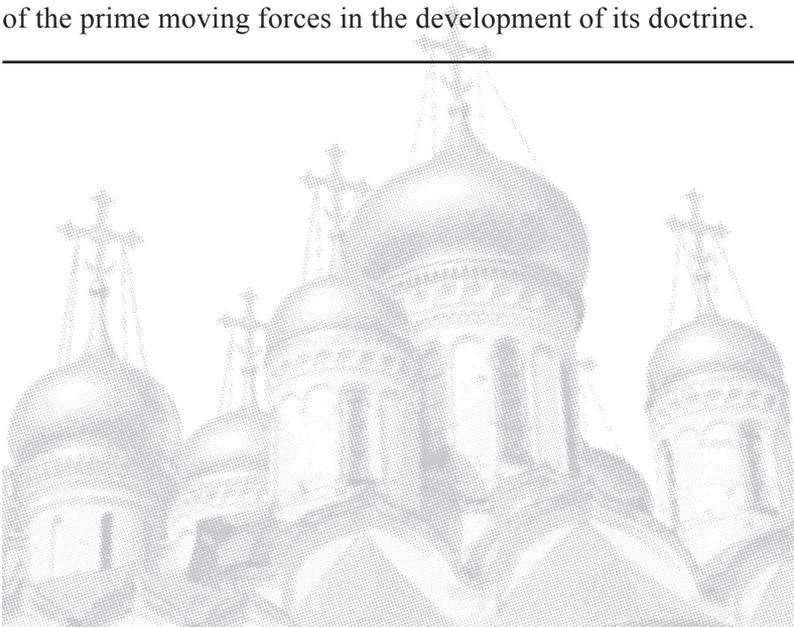
RED AIR

**1★ WAR, IDEOLOGY
AND DOCTRINE**





Armies and navies, military forces fighting in a land or sea environment, have traditionally evolved their doctrine from historical experience and theory. The impact of technology on doctrine development had been minimal till the advent of air power. Land and maritime forces have never been directly subjected to the technological rate of change associated with the development of air power. With the addition of the third dimension to the realm of warfare, the basics of doctrinal thinking underwent a rapid overhaul. In the modern context, doctrine is derived from a judicious combination of the lessons from the history of warfare, developmental thought on war fighting theory and the impact of emerging technologies. In the case of air power, technology is one of the prime moving forces in the development of its doctrine.



1. WAR, IDEOLOGY AND DOCTRINE



“War, says Heraclitus, is the father of things. From the clash of counterpitched forces in the moment of mortal danger...arise new and most consequential developments”

L. von Ranke¹

War has been a universal phenomenon throughout recorded history. History of mankind is in reality a recording of wars, great and small, which were fought between tribes, nations, civilisations and religions, interspersed with accounts of the times of comparative peace. Wars have been fought for reasons bordering on the mundane to the exalted. Nations and people go to war in order to protect and propagate what they perceive as the correct ‘way of life’. The reason why a nation becomes an aggressor in the eyes of the rest of the world is also the same. Even if it is subsequently revealed that the reasons were swathed in personal beliefs and needs of the leaders, at least at the outset the people of the nation will have to believe in the virtuousness of their cause to allow the war to proceed. Study and understanding of war and its impact on a nation is therefore essential to ensure adequate preparedness in the pursuit of national security goals.

War in its many facets can be studied both from experience gained by personal involvement as well as from history. In studying war, its history provides a wider view of practical experience, than is available to a soldier in terms of actual personal combat experience. ‘History is universal experience’—the experience not of one or a few people, but of a large number of people under manifold conditions.² The foundation for a comprehensive study of warfare must be broad-based and must at all times avoid a narrow outlook. Any analysis of warfare will confirm the truism that the combatants—human beings—are basically similar in nature. But while having the same emotional attributes, individuals are conditioned by the environment in which

