

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Dima Adamsky, *The Culture of Military Innovation: The Impact of Cultural Factors on the Revolution in Military Affairs in Russia, the US, and Israel*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010, 248 pp. \$US 25.95 paper (978-0-8047-6952-5), \$US 65 hardcover (978-0-8047-6951-8).

Dima Adamsky's *The Culture of Military Innovation* is an account of how one intellectual paradigm, called the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA), rose and fell in the militaries of the USSR, USA and Israel. Adamsky characterizes it as an empirical and theoretical contribution to the third, constructivist wave of strategic culture scholarship. This subdiscipline has made various attempts to identify culture, instead of rationality, as "the pivotal intervening variable" in military development. The study distinguishes itself within its subdiscipline for its excellent sources (archival material from all three countries and interviews in Israel), skillful argumentation, and very intelligent case selection.

Adamsky's cases connect logically and make for compelling reading. Theorists working in the USSR coined RMA to refer to a series of insights derived from analyzing new NATO (mainly American) threats. The Soviets realized that American long-range weapons and sensors seriously undermined conventional Soviet field placement. This prompted a wild futurology among a powerful cadre within the general staff. They thought they had discovered an entirely new force paradigm, the key principles of which were low density, high velocity troop deployment and an absolute need to maintain technological parity or advantage.

Happily for the Soviets, the Americans were slow to catch on. They had developed the technology in order to strike deep into the Soviet rear echelons, but did not perceive other uses for it until they translated the Soviets' professional journals in the late 1980s. Not until Desert Storm (1990–1) did they implement their version of RMA. Its perceived success in that conflict initiated Donald Rumsfeld's controversial "Transformation," a series of major operational, organizational and budgetary changes to the Department of Defense and the services.

Having studied the Soviet military journals and kept abreast of American technological developments, the Israelis were the first to wage an RMA-style war. They successfully fused Soviet principles and American technology in the First Lebanon War in 1982. This prompted the Israeli Air Force to embrace RMA. RMA theorizing gradually spread through-

out the IDF, articulated in trendy, postmodern terminology that was little understood but widely emulated. The results were disastrous.

Certainly, Adamsky has an intriguing puzzle: why did theory precede technology in the USSR, technology precede theory in the US, and implementation precede theory in Israel? His key contribution to strategic culture studies is to model the causal effect of culture on strategy through cultural psychology. To do so, he brackets the discussion of RMA's military and strategic claims. And here we arrive at the first serious problem in the work: a confusion between imagination and prediction, an error often committed by military strategists and one deeply ingrained in security studies.

By ignoring whether RMA theorizing truly reflects a revolution in warfare and whether RMA's adoption by the three nations would have been strategically preferable to their alternatives, Adamsky short-changes his reader. These are big issues with difficult answers and the temptation to bracket them is understandable. Without them, however, the reader lacks the ability to assess whether the development and implementation of RMA reflected sound efforts to predict better military strategy. The question of whether the Soviets were better predictors of future war or simply more imaginative ones is not answerable in these terms.

RMA's moment has passed. Today, Russian, American, and Israeli theorists address a world defined by small wars between dramatically unequal forces. Irregular warfare has not invalidated RMA, but it does reveal its narrowness and historical specificity. Long-distance strike and surveillance capacity means that your opponent cannot field forces in the open very successfully; but if your opponent mixes his forces with the civilian population, he forces you out of the world of RMA into the very different world of counterinsurgency. Every perspective is equally blinding; abandoning RMA theory for counterinsurgency will leave militaries open to challengers who gain technological advantages in strike and surveillance.

The lesson is that strategic imagination is not the same thing as strategic prediction. From this perspective, Adamsky's question should be shifted somewhat, from investigating why the Soviet theorists were better strategists to why they were more imaginative ones. Adamsky relies on national strategic culture arguments derived from cultural psychology to explain the disparity. Here, a second problem becomes apparent as this choice leads him to ignore rich developments in the sociological understanding of culture. His use of cultural psychology theory simply fails him in key points.

Adamsky's rigid theoretical edifice creates confusion at the level of actor and individual agency. He models culture at the nation-state level within a rigid binary structure. Nations are either high-context, in which

case they are also collectivist, hierarchical, polychronic and dialectical, or low-context, in which case they are individualistic, egalitarian, monochronic and analytic. Russia (dominating the USSR) and Israel belong in the former and more imaginative column, the US in the latter.

The theory is excessively parsimonious from the sociological perspective and leads to a form of cultural determinism that makes little sense given his level of analysis, namely groups of intellectual elites competing within national defense establishments. For example, Americans are defined as analytical thinkers, which prevents American strategists from making the imaginative leaps of the Soviet theorists. Nevertheless, a small group of Americans in the Office of Net Assessment (ONA) were capable of dialectical thought, and these men were able to gain considerable organizational power. Are they not products of American culture?

The cultural psychology approach needs to be scaled down to the level of organizational culture in order for this approach to work. However, an even more fruitful approach would be to follow the direction of recent cultural sociological theory and focus on meaning. According to this way of thinking, strategists struggle among themselves to define the meaning of war and peace for their organizations. Cultural actors tap into the codes, narratives and norms of their organization to impress their meanings on their fellows. They are in turn motivated by their own understanding of war and the better peace that justifies it.

We are blinded by new theories as surely as by the old. Clausewitz recognized this, but he believed in military geniuses who could grasp the best of received wisdom and seamlessly blend it with the new. In our less romantic age, we remain strangely susceptible to theories that promise a new way of war, forgetting that they also offer new ways to lose. Adamsky's study offers a powerful but, ultimately, sociologically unconvincing account of the rise of the most militarily important intellectual paradigm of the second half of the twentieth century. Let us hope that sociologists can learn from the limitations of his work in order to understand the new paradigms that again promise success while creating new conditions of failure.

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