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INTERVENTIONS



## The mythical 'Gerasimov Doctrine' and the language of threat

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This is a polemic. It is a polemic against the use of the term the 'Gerasimov Doctrine' to describe a supposed dramatic turn in Russian strategic thinking. It is a polemic against the way that pseudo-technical terms and jargon can be mobilised and appropriated not simply to obscure the truth but also to drive a hawkish political-security agenda. It is also an apologia, because to a degree, it is all my fault.

Back in February 2013, before the current Russia-West political conflict blossomed with the Ukrainian 'Euromaidan' revolution and the annexation of Crimea, Russian Chief of the General Staff General Valeryi Gerasimov wrote an article called 'The Value of Science in Prediction' for the hardly-mass-market *Voenna-promyshlennyi kur'er*, the *Military-Industrial Courier*. In it, he warned that

In the 21st century we have seen a tendency toward blurring the lines between the states of war and peace. Wars are no longer declared and, having begun, proceed according to an unfamiliar template. (Gerasimov 2013, 2)

He went on to describe how a 'perfectly thriving state can, in a matter of months and even days, be transformed into an arena of fierce armed conflict, become a victim of foreign intervention, and sink into a web of chaos, humanitarian catastrophe, and civil war'. Subversion, disinformation, and sabotage prepare the ground for eventual kinetic operations, and the 'role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals' are now such that 'in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness'.

He was channelling the Russian perspective on the Arab Spring and the 'coloured revolution' risings in the post-Soviet states, something persistently blamed on shadowy Western – American – machinations. He was also making the regular military's case for continued relevance (in other words, continued budget priority) in an age of such 'non-military' warfare: essentially their capacity to wipe out any such expressions of Western subversion. The September 2017 *Zapad* military exercises demonstrated this with pyrotechnic extravagance, the first few days being devoted to responding to the incursions of foreign 'diversionary elements' with massive, long-range firepower and close-quarters skirmishes alike.

In July 2014, I published a partial translation of Gerasimov's article by Robert Coulsdon of RFE/RL, with my own comments and gloss, on my blog, *In Moscow's Shadows* (Galeotti 2014). Looking for a snappy title, I called it 'The "Gerasimov Doctrine" and Russian Non-Linear War'. Even then, I warned in the text that it was not

a doctrine as such, and that this formulation was simply a placeholder for the ideas evolving in Russian military thinking. Having made that disclaimer, I thought no more about it. Big mistake.

Since the 'little green men' – Russian special forces with no insignia, officially disowned by Moscow – fanned out across Crimea, and given the massive use of disinformation and deniable auxiliaries and proxies in the Donbas, it has been easy for many to see Gerasimov as prophetic and programmatic. The fact that he was a career tank officer who had demonstrated no theoretical flair (or interest) up to this point did not seem to count against this easy assumption, nor that the article looked as if it had been compiled by several different authors, nor that he apparently came up with some grand new unified theory of war within a few months of his elevation.

A Google search for 'Gerasimov doctrine' on 20 September 2017 pulled up about 17,100 results. The usual reiterative process that launders a mistake or groundless assertion through multiple uses, until no one realises how questionable its provenance, has done its work. The phrase now crops up as if a recognised term of art in heavy-weight newspapers, news magazine sites and even government discussion. US Senator Chris Coons (D-Del.) warns that 'Russia has enthusiastically – and, so far, somewhat successfully – employed the Gerasimov Doctrine by waging a covert and undeclared hybrid war on the West' (2017). The British House of Commons Defence Select Committee describes (2016, paragraph 13) Gerasimov as 'a leading military theorist' and references 'his' doctrine as established fact. Nor is this purely deployed to characterise Russian-Western relations. It is apparently the 'influential Russian doctrine' that explains Moscow's policies in Latin America (Farah and Reyes 2016, 107). Even the US Army's Asymmetric Warfare Group's *Russian New Generation Warfare Handbook* (2016) uses the term.

This is all despite the fact that Gerasimov himself has never acknowledged that he was speaking programmatically, that no Russian defence publications use the phrase except to deride it, and that it does not fit the parameters of a doctrine. Nor, for that matter, is it held to be relevant that pretty much every serious analyst of Russian military thinking agrees that there simply is no such thing (see, for example, Bartles 2016; Giles 2016; Kofman 2016; McDermott 2016 for a small sampling).

Why should we care? Claiming insignificance is the first line of defence for those challenged for their (ab)use of this term. It is clear that Russia is using all kinds of non-kinetic instruments to achieve its ends. So whether we call it the 'Gerasimov doctrine', 'hybrid war' (another misnomer) or something else, this is just a useful term for the contemporary challenge, so the argument goes. But it does matter, because words make worlds, and how we choose to label and discuss a threat defines it.

First of all, the very existence of a specific term for their supposed way of war 'others' Russia. It carries with it the mistaken and dangerous assumptions that what they are doing is both new and truly distinctive and, by implication, uniquely threatening. There is, however, nothing that is conceptually novel about current Russian practice. The means may be different, with the emergence of the internet in particular, and the world – largely post-ideological, increasingly interconnected – in which various tactics are used is certainly different. Otherwise, what the Russians are doing would be familiar not just to any Cold War strategist but as far back as organised warfare. 'Fake news'? Ask Lord Haw-Haw – or take a look at Octavian's brutal disinformation campaign to claim

that his rival for power in Rome, Mark Anthony, was a dissolute puppet of Egyptian queen Cleopatra. Political subversion? Since when have regimes not sought to influence their neighbours and rivals – and it is not as though the West does not encourage groups in Russia that the Kremlin considers threats. Even the infamous computer hacks and leaks of doctored emails could be seen as modern counterparts to the spreading of fake Venetian *relazioni* (official correspondence) in the sixteenth century, or even the sixth-century Symmachean forgeries, documents produced as part of the political struggle between Pope Symmachus and anti-pope Laurentius. And so the list goes on.

Putin's Kremlin, inspired by a (largely) misguided but genuine belief that it faces Western attempts to marginalise and destabilise it, has moved onto war footing and certainly uses these means with greater enthusiasm and less restraint. However, to present them as unique in their methods, not just compared with the West, but other geopolitical players, such as China and Iran, is hard to sustain. Of course, the sad truth is that you often do not need to argue the case, if instead the assumptions and prejudices come pre-packaged in a nice neologism.

And what a neologism! 'Doctrine', a technical term in Russian parlance meaning a foundational strategy document, sounds alien and menacing in English. Redolent of the titles of thick thrillers sitting on airport bookshop shelves, with their predilection for names incorporating words like protocol, codex, and sanction, it immediately evokes not only threat, but a concrete plan and the kind of ruthless and disciplined state machine able to apply it. Today's Russia is in so many ways a kleptocratic mess of feuding individuals and interests, an adhococracy rather than a militocracy, but nonetheless this is a title that can evoke Cold War stereotypes of serried ranks of soldier-drones, marching in lockstep through Red Square on their way westwards.

Gerasimov himself is equally useful. His glowering image graces many of the breathless articles about the so-called 'new Russian way of war'. A craggy, heavysset career soldier, always in uniform, always looking serious, he is a perfect match for one of the classic tropes of the Russian villain. Not the urbane, chess-playing schemer but the thuggish bruiser, Ivan Drago from *Rocky IV* rather than John LeCarre's Karla.

Michael Kofman has joked that one of the values of the term 'Gerasimov doctrine' is that by its use, it reveals the clueless to the experts. However, in the age of what Nichols (2017) has called the death of expertise, when hard-earned learning is often discounted in favour of the well-turned phrase, and when scholarly precision is no match for vitriol and passion, such phrases acquire disproportionate power.

This is no 'new way of war'. It is not Gerasimov's, and it is not a doctrine. But threat is a matter of perception, and perception drives policy. In light of Russia's campaign to divide, distract, and dismay the West through various non-kinetic means (Galeotti 2017), it is all too easy and convenient to turn to simple explanations for the woes of a complex world. From the election of Donald Trump to Britain's Brexit vote, there is comfort in blaming an outsider, and the 'Gerasimov Doctrine' is ready to oblige.

Not only does this privilege the 'Russians did it' line, making it all too easy to hand-wave away potential alternative or more important explanations for any reversals, it also ratchets up the tone and scale of the West-Russia crisis. While possessed of nuclear weapons and armed forces that have undoubtedly been reformed extensively since the ruinous 1990s, Russia remains an essentially regional power, and one with an economy smaller than that of Spain, a woeful lack of soft power, and questionable long-term

demographic and economic prospects. As an authoritarian state, it is able to mobilise a greater share of its resources on security, at least in the medium term, and is less constrained by issues of public opinion and legislative accountability. It is, however, still limited by its resources, and already showing signs of over-extension. It is mired in both Syria and south-eastern Ukraine, with little prospect of a quick and happy end to either war, and it is actually having to reduce its defence budget.

Such objective considerations matter little, though, in the face of a compelling threat representation that is intrinsically menacing and makes a virtue of weakness. The very brilliance of the notion of the 'Gerasimov doctrine' is that it suggests that cunning and ruthlessness can substitute for economic, military or political capacity. Those who have an interest in magnifying the threat, whether to sell research, raise profiles or justify budgets, are glad to take fullest advantage of the opportunity. Those who challenge it are dismissed as peaceniks, appeasers or the Kremlin's 'useful idiots'.

Perhaps the crowning irony, though, is that what Gerasimov's article really indicated is that, in a depressing piece of mirror-imaging, Moscow has concluded that it is the West that has a 'new way of war'. Just as the 'Gerasimov doctrine' provides a convenient way of demonising Russia and ascribing every reversal to Moscow's machinations, so too this notion of the West's *gibridnaya voyna*, hybrid war, is the Kremlin's alibi. Anti-corruption protests at home? Ukrainian resistance to being part of Russia's sphere of influence? Clearly all evidence of Western ploys. Not only is this no new or distinctive way of war, it is not even a new or distinctive way of misunderstanding and misrepresenting it.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

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