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**FROM NEW GENERATION WARFARE
TO LOST GENERATION WARFARE:
TRAINING DEFICIENCIES OF THE
RUSSIAN BATTALION TACTICAL
GROUPS**

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Introduction

Since the Russian invasion of Crimea, Western military analysts had difficulty defining Russia's art of war. The scholarly descriptions ranged from 'fourth-generation warfare' to 'non-linear warfare' and 'hybrid warfare' (Czekaj & Howeverd, 2019, p. 179). However, prominent Russian scholars, such as Slipchenko, Major General Vladimirov and General Gareev offered an alternative concept to distance themselves from the Western rational framework. They suggested that the Russian military-strategic thinking should be described as 'new generation warfare' (NGW), which would be a fusion of 'sixth-generation warfare,' 'asymmetric warfare,' 'network-centric warfare,' and 'low-intensity conflict' in combination with 'reflexive control' (Czekaj & Howeverd, 2019, pp.179-81). The purpose of this paper is to assess the performance of Battalion Tactical Groups (BTGs) in Ukraine as part of Russia's NGW strategy. This allows to highlight the general misconceptions about Russian military capabilities, which in turn allows to draw lessons for the future defence of Europe.

Misconception about NGW

NGW is also referred to as the 'Gerasimov doctrine.' In 2013, the Russian General Gerasimov published a paper in which he asserted that "the very 'rules of war' have changed. The role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness" (as cited in McKew, 2017, para.3). This new type of warfare prioritises the mind as battlespace by morally and psychologically influencing enemy civilians and military personnel, through means of informational-psychological warfare (Czekaj & Howeverd, 2019, pp.179-81). This, in turn, would create favourable situations prior to military operations in order to reduce the duration and the scale of kinetic military action (Cranny-Evans & Kaushal, 2022, para.3).

However, the problematic nature of the NGW is that non-kinetic and kinetic warfare do not necessarily complement one another. In fact, attempts to create sympathy among the enemy population might fail when this is followed by a direct assault, which could spur disloyalty. This strategic blind spot most likely lay at the heart of Russia's failed offensive campaign in Ukraine. The Russian Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) launched a large-scale cyber-attack before the invasion, to break the political spirit and discourage the Ukrainian military forces from fighting. Nevertheless, this ultimately failed to materialise (Cranny-Evans & Kaushal, 2022, paras. 3, 5).

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Consequently, military planners overestimated the limited impact of informational-psychological warfare. This, in turn, explains why the transition to the kinetic phase was insufficiently coordinated at the military top due to the expectation of little resistance (Cranny-Evans & Kaushal, 2022, paras. 3, 5). However, less discussed is how the Russian invasion of Ukraine was already prone to failure due to deeply embedded flaws within the Russian force design. In fact, the assumption of a rapid victory was mainly based on wishful thinking, whereby its fixation on non-kinetic means as an independent battlefield had to compensate for Russia's kinetic incapacities (Peterson, 2022, para. 2). Especially the deployment of BTGs as the primary manoeuvre element revealed training deficiencies within the Russian military (Canopolat, 2022, para. 4).

Structural Redesign of the Russian Army

In 2008, the Russian Ministry of Defence launched the 'New Program' to reform its military structure whereby emphasis was placed on transforming its Soviet-dated mobilisation army into a smaller, but more professionalised force (Canopolat, 2022, para. 4). Finally, this decision was reversed in 2013, and Russia adopted instead a partial-mobilisation force in order to have a win-win situation: more servicemen, fewer costs, and an increased level of readiness.

However, Russia experienced great difficulties to operate within the similar formation structure from the Soviet era. Therefore, the focus was replacing the robust Division-Regiment-Battalion with a Brigade-Battalion structure. This did not only allow to increase the level of flexibility and modernise the army, but also ensured that each brigade would be supported with 'combat-ready' BTGs. Thus, the contracted servicemen, also known as *kontraktniki*, were placed in these units, while the conscripts, better known as *prizivniki*, could continue serving at brigade level (Baev, 2022, p. 15).

The advantage of deploying BTGs is that they are highly mobile and manoeuvrable, while being supported with different capabilities (Baev, 2022, p. 15). Every BTG is roughly composed of three mechanised infantry companies, one tank company, one anti-tank company, two or three tube artillery batteries, one multiple rocket launcher battery, and two air defence batteries. However, the equipment can be different per BTG, depending on the military district where it has been established. For example, they can be equipped with T72B, T-80U, T-90A, or any other vehicle (Saw, 2022, paras.16-17).

Integrating different combat arms into one unit complements the weakness of a single arm system with the strength of another arm system. This step provides a significant advantage in comparison to fighting in separate infantry, armour, and artillery units (Fox, 2022, para.10). Prior to the invasion, around 125 to 130 BTGs were placed around the Russo-Ukrainian border. From there, they had to fight on three fronts during the opening phase of the invasion. However, the first days of the war already revealed several structural limitations, through which the BTGs failed to orchestrate their combined arms capabilities (Kofman & Lee; Teulingkx & Verbreuk, 2023).

Poor Performance of BTGs

First of all, many BTGs have been unmanned due to the short timeframe in which they have been established, and a stagnation in recruitment over the past five years. Although each BTG should officially consist of 700 to 900 servicemen, General Gerasimov never fully succeeded in reaching these targets. Initially, Russian military officials planned to contract 499.200 servicemen in 2019. However, years of mistreatment of conscripts, insufficient investments, and low morale resulted that Russia only successfully recruited 394.000 contract men in 2019, which increased to approximately 220.000 in 2022 (Kofman & Lee; Teulingkx & Verbreuk, 2023).

Therefore, many of these BTGs were forced to fall back on conscripts, which form at least a quarter of Russia's total military manpower. This explains why the level of readiness and professionalisation did not meet the desired standards. There has been primarily a lack of infantry within each BTG. This problem already appeared during the deployment of BTGs in the 2014-2015 Donbas campaign. Although the military staff relied on separatist forces as a quick fix, they never fully succeeded to correct the infantry gap prior to the invasion (Kofman & Lee; Teulingkx & Verbreuk, 2023).

Still, the underperformance of the BTGs is not only caused by the low level of recruitment. The conscripts and servicemen could have complemented one another if they had been adequately trained in the first place. A professional soldier should be well-instructed, motivated, disciplined, and equipped. This requires a drastic organisational design, which extends beyond a redesign of the force structure (Van Bladel, 2022, para. 5-7).

During the early fighting around North Bucha and Irpin, and the south of Mykolaiv, the BTGs were not able to capture medium-sized towns, and suffered heavily once they stepped into urban areas (Verbreuk & Teulingkx, 2023, p.8). Russian forces were barely informed prior to the invasion about their mission; they assumed that they would march directly to their objective once they crossed the Russo-Ukrainian border without facing serious resistance. However, they would soon be confronted with a battle-ready enemy (Saw, 2022, para. 23). The BTGs were especially unprepared for Ukraine's heavy use of artillery and drones. Attempts to break defence lines were answered with high-precision strikes, resulting in severe casualties. Ukraine's increased assertiveness greatly burdened the BTGs 'superior mobility' since they have been insufficiently trained to engage in defensive battles (Baev, 2022, p. 15-17).

Fighting in Small versus Larger Theatres

During the 2014-2015 Donbas campaign, the BTGs could travel along secured and short passages. However, these were mainly in control of the DPA-LPA, which allowed to keep the supply lines short. Any remedies could be quickly overcome. The previous successes created a military culture that failed to sufficiently integrate tactical reconnaissance (Canpolat, 2022; Fox, 2022). However, advancing and extending supply lines must be defended, especially in larger theatres, such as the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. If Russia had slowed its advances, they could have secured their small bases and equipped them with repair depots, medical stations and stockpiles. Nonetheless, they tried to penetrate rapidly forward instead, through which their supply lines became stretched (Berkowitz & Galocha, 2022, para. 10).

An illustrative example is the 40 mile-long convoy outside Kyiv, which was vulnerable to Ukrainian ambushes (Berkowitz & Galocha, 2022, para. 10). The absence of sufficient logistic brigades, evacuation and resupply convoys, and ground forces further exacerbated the situation. They failed to protect long lines of communication, which in turn resulted in the isolation of units. Russian generals even had to visit the frontlines to recollect the BTGs. As opposed to NATO's 'mission command' philosophy, Russia's military architecture is highly centralised, which prevents low-level officers of BTGs from taking the initiative on the battlefield (Verbreuk & Teulingkx, 2023, pp.8-9).

Russia is Learning from its Previous Mistakes

Russia's doctrinal misconceptions about modern warfare resulted in an overreliance on non-kinetic means. This transformation was mainly based on wishful thinking in order to compensate for its kinetic incapacities. As the first months of the invasion already revealed, modern warfare is still played out by conventional means. However, Russia is caught between the past and future regarding its manpower paradox.

Indeed, to the surprise of Western military analysts, the shift from a Division-Regiment-Battalion to a Brigade-Battalion structure did not prove to be a decisive factor in the war. There are clear strategic, operational and tactical problems that Russian BTGs need to overcome in order to be a more effective instrument in larger theatres. Nevertheless, Russia is learning from its previous mistakes as the war evolves. Therefore, the West should not underestimate the value of BTGs since they do not operate the same as they did during the early stages of the war. (Berkowitz & Galocha, 2022, p. 15-17).

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