



Bettina Renz. *Russia's Military Revival*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018. vii + 249 pp. \$69.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5095-1614-8.

Reviewed by Mara Kozelsky (University of South Alabama)

Published on H-War (May, 2020)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Russia inherited a large outdated arsenal and a 2.8-million-man army. Poorly equipped and often undertrained or underfed, Russian soldiers struggled to suppress guerrilla separatists in Chechnya in the 1990s, while combatting terrible corruption in their own ranks. Russia's economic crisis of that same decade forced the state to prioritize spending. Appearances of military decline prompted many contemporary observers to confuse bankruptcy with purposeful demilitarization. In *Russia's Military Revival*, Bettina Renz paints a more accurate picture. She shows that Russia never intended demilitarization. Instead, military leaders drafted ambitious, thoughtful plans in line with Russia's historic Great Power status, while maintaining the nuclear arsenal and rocket forces. Although often dependent on old designs, the Russian defense industry continued to compete with the United States in production and sales of jets, submarines, tanks, helicopters, and more.

According to Renz, current Russian policy objectives harken to tsarist Westphalian notions of Russia as a Great Power. Like the tsars and Soviet premiers after them, Russian presidents have expected to exercise significant influence in world diplomacy. Like their imperial and Soviet predecessors, Russian presidents have claimed the right to be the dominating power in the "Near Abroad."

Across five well-paced, highly readable chapters wrapped with an introduction and conclusion, Renz shows how historic legacies, especially the blueprint drafted in the Boris Yeltsin years, thread through current military thinking.

When Yeltsin became president in 1991, he initiated a series of military reforms that reflected Russia's new political and military reality. He transformed the KGB (Committee for State Security) into the FSB (Federal Security Service), which maintained strength and reported directly to the new president. He then splintered military command to prevent a potential challenge to presidential authority from the Soviet brass. He was confronted with looming economic collapse, and his military goals did not scale to available funds. For example, the 1993 military doctrine proscribed a large army for interstate war, as well as lean professionalized units able to handle small-scale border conflicts then erupting across Soviet borders. That same year, Yeltsin expressed Russia's role as a "special guarantor" of stability in the former territory of the USSR; he claimed a historic right to act unilaterally in the region.

Despite his vision, military policy in the Yeltsin years was often chaotic and informed by events on the ground. For example, Renz suggests that Moscow approved Russian involvement in Transnistrian separatist activity only after the

fact, while Russia's brute-force approach ill-suited the Chechen's guerrilla combat. Russian deployment of troops in the Tajikistan Civil War (1992-97) offers one of the more compelling cases of Russian intent to stabilize its Near Abroad; concerned about mujahidin exploiting local conflicts, Russian forces continued to patrol the Tajikistan border with Afghanistan through 2005. Outside of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Moscow expected to be integrated into multilateral foreign policy decisions. According to Renz, Russian leaders felt snubbed in 1994 when they were not consulted in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) airstrikes of Bosnian Serbs. When NATO formed an Operation Allied Force (OAF) for Kosovo in 1999, the rising president Vladimir Putin perceived a strong military was necessary in order for Russia's voice to be heard.

Russia's economic recovery coincided with Putin's first presidential term (2000-2004), which enabled him to put into practice preexisting military philosophies. Renz points especially to theorist Vladimir Shipchenko, heir to the 1970s Soviet Military-Technical Revolution. In the early 1990s, Shipchenko envisioned that "future wars will be 'contactless' and fought with stand-off precision weapons" (p. 168). He and those like him predicted a "sixth-generation warfare," a time when traditional army, air, and navy divisions will become redundant. By 2008, the short war in Georgia had demonstrated the desirability of a smaller more professionalized force over the larger conscript army model, and the Russian state could finally afford to implement long-desired changes. By the same token, the so-called Gerasimov doctrine (2013) was not new but reflected a deeper strand of Soviet/Russian military thinking as well as Russian worries about Western interference. The increase in the Putin-era military spending from nineteen billion dollars in 1998 to ninety billion dollars in 2015 similarly does not reflect a sudden change of course: the percentage of the GDP has remained the same.

Renz's arguments regarding historical continuity in current Russian foreign policy and military decision-making help balance hawkish rhetoric predicting a renewed Cold War. Drawing on a wide array of secondary sources, Renz also offers a useful sketch of Russian military reorganization in the post-Soviet era. She notes that while Russia has increased production of tanks, small submarines, and fighter jets, Russian weapons typically rely on upgraded legacy designs. Production on new designs, including the T-14 Armata tank or the PAK-FA fighter jet, have been delayed or canceled. Further, the goal of domesticating production of microelectronics and information technology has not been achieved. The patchy record in certain defense-industrial capabilities should not be confused, however, with stagnation.

Since the Georgian War (2008), Russia has made evident gains in cyber warfare and has improved the C4ISR (command, control, communication, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance). The state has capped the standing army at one million and should achieve the goal of replacing the conscript model with a highly professionalized force by 2025. Evidence of professionalization and mastery of information was evident in Crimea, but here again, Renz injects some balance into her assessment, questioning whether the operation would have succeeded without Russia's well-manned military base in Sevastopol.

Throughout *Russia's Military Revival*, Renz demonstrates that the Russian military has not embarked on a sudden or dramatic rearmament, nor does the state desire to confront the West in a renewed Cold War. Instead Russia expects to be the dominant Great Power influence in its border states and believes a strong military to be its entry into multilateral decision-making in more distant places like Syria. Specialists and nonspecialists alike will be interested in the work, including in Renz's account of Russian paramilitary force structures, such as the Russian border guards, the police, the FSB, the Ministry of Emergency Situa-

tions (MChS) (like the Federal Emergency Management Agency [FEMA] but composed of armed veterans), and similar organizations. Some critics will have preferred her to take a more skeptical view in relation to Russian expansionist aims in Crimea and Ukraine. Others will like to see more discussion of nuclear capabilities and cyber-warfare activities. Those matters aside, the book provides an insightful analysis of Russian military philosophy in the post-Soviet period and a useful survey of Russian military and paramilitary strengths.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Mara Kozelsky. Review of Renz, Bettina. *Russia's Military Revival*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. May, 2020.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54220>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.