
Misreading Svechin: Attrition, Annihilation, and Historicism



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Abstract

Soviet military theorist Aleksandr Svechin is often misperceived as an advocate of strategies of attrition over destruction or annihilation. In fact, Svechin was an historicist, who saw the precise balance between attrition and annihilation, or defense and offense, as constantly shifting as a result of changing material circumstances. A close examination of his theoretical and historical works reveals the depth of his thinking, while his response to Russia's 1916 Brusilov Offensive shows his support for ambitious strategies of annihilation under the proper circumstances.

Modern scholarship rightly gives Soviet military theorists great credit for their central role in the development of modern concepts of mechanized warfare and operational art.¹ At the same time, those who study military thought have resurrected imperial Russian officer and Soviet theorist Aleksandr Andreevich Svechin (1878-1938) from undeserved obscurity.² Svechin, an historian and military

1. The author is grateful for the helpful comments of Jacob Kipp, John Kuehn, Alexander Marshall, Bruce Menning, and the *Journal's* anonymous reviewer.

2. For general discussions of Soviet operational thinking, see Richard Simpkin, *Deep Battle: The Brainchild of Marshal Tukhachevskii* (London: Brassey's, 1987); Richard Harrison, *The Russian Way of War, 1904-1940* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001); Robert M. Citino, *Quest for Decisive Victory: From Stalemate to Blitzkrieg in Europe, 1899-1940* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 210-213. For the most accessible English-language introduction to Svechin, see Aleksandr A. Svechin, *Strategy*, ed. Kent Lee (Minneapolis: Eastview, 1992).

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Aleksandr Andreevich Svechin
[Courtesy of the author]

thinker who bridged the divide between imperial Russia and the Soviet Union, is given pride of place among Soviet theorists for the breadth and systematic nature of his approach, avoiding the mechanical and doctrinaire application of Marxism that plagues some of his contemporaries like the brilliant and ambitious Mikhail Nikolaevich Tukhachevskii. Svechin's work, particularly as laid out in such monumental works as *Strategy* and *History of the Military Art*, approaches *On War* of Carl von Clausewitz in its scope and insight.

The irony, however, is that Svechin had almost nothing to say about the mobile warfare that came to be the Soviet Union's contribution to operational thinking. Though Svechin was central to formulating the definition of operational warfare as a stage intermediate between tactics and strategy,³

his most productive years were finished before armored vehicles and aircraft reached the level of development that required fundamentally new approaches to the battlefield. He became embroiled in a Soviet campaign against former tsarist military officers at the beginning of the 1930s, and was executed in 1938 in Joseph Stalin's purge of the Red Army's officer corps. As a result, through no fault of his own, and despite all his virtues as a military thinker, Svechin's career as a theorist was over too soon to devote much time or attention to the problems of mobile, mechanized warfare. The seminal Soviet insights came instead in works from younger theorists such as V. K. Triandafillov's *The Character of Operations of the Contemporary Army* and G. S. Isserson's *The Evolution of Operational Art*.⁴ Because Svechin's works generally belong to an earlier technological age, scholars have often missed the real essence of his military thought. In particular, the breadth of Svechin's thinking has often been shoe-horned into narrow appraisals centering around limited and schematic questions: which approach to military strategy is superior—annihilation or attrition? Offense or defense? Too many scholars have seen Svechin as a single-minded adherent of attrition or defensive strategies, missing the real message of his work. Svechin was at his core an evolutionary thinker, one who regarded proper military art as always changing with the environment and circumstances. Contrary to his common perception in the West

3. Jacob Kipp, "Two Views of Warsaw: The Russian Civil War and Soviet Operational Art, 1920-1932," in R. J. C. McKercher and Michael A. Hennessy, eds., *The Operational Art: Developments in the Theories of War* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1996), 61.

4. V. K. Triandafillov, *Kharakter operatsii sovremennykh armii* (Moscow: Gosizdat, 1929); G. S. Isserson, *Evolutsiia operativnogo iskusstva* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1932).

as an advocate of attrition, or of defensive strategies, Svechin regarded judging one sort of strategy as inherently superior to another as the height of folly.

While some scholars rightly note the subtlety and complexity of Svechin's views, and do not portray him as a one-sided advocate of attrition,⁵ he has been overwhelmingly characterized in the Western scholarly and professional literature as a partisan of attrition as the proper basis for strategy and tactics. Svechin was an unabashed admirer of the German military historian Hans Delbrück (1848-1929), and adopted Delbrück's distinction between a strategy that attempted to achieve victory by incremental steps, draining and exhausting the enemy through attrition (*Ermattungsstrategie*) and a strategy of victory through a rapid and overwhelming effort at annihilation (*Niederwerfungsstrategie*). Svechin's usual word for attrition is *izmor*, from the verb *morit'* (to exhaust, to drain). A less common term for the same concept is *istoshchenie*, from the verb *istoshchit'* (to emaciate, to exhaust). Svechin balanced attrition against its countervailing strategy of destruction or annihilation. Svechin's word here is *sokrushenie*, from *krushit'* (to shatter, to destroy). The widespread consensus on Svechin's one-sided advocacy of attrition makes the mistake of taking a strategy that Svechin indeed did support for the limited and particular circumstances of Soviet Union in the 1920s (and even here his view is more nuanced than often presented) and generalizing from that particular and qualified judgment to a claim that it represents Svechin's views of the military art more broadly. The picture of Svechin as a partisan of defense and attrition over offensive strategies of annihilation has proved remarkably persistent.⁶

5. For example, R. Craig Nation, *Black Earth, Red Star: A History of Soviet Security Policy, 1917-1991* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992), 49. In Jacob Kipp's "Two Views," 67, the emphasis is on Svechin's advocacy of attrition for the specific case of the Soviet Union in the 1920s, not a more general claim for the superiority of attrition. See also Kipp, "Military Doctrine and the Origins of Operational Art, 1917-1936," in Willard C. Frank and Philip S. Gillette, eds., *Soviet Military Doctrine from Lenin to Gorbachev, 1915-1991* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1992), 110, and "Military Reform and the Red Army, 1918-1941: Bolsheviks, *Voyenspetsy*, and the Young Red Commanders," in Harold R. Winton and David R. Mets, eds., *The Challenge of Change: Military Institutions and New Realities, 1918-1941* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 129-130.

6. On Svechin as a partisan of attrition over destruction, Condoleezza Rice writes that Svechin was convinced of "the fallacy of operations in depth to achieve decisive victory" and claimed "the next war would be of attrition" but in support of this only cites Svechin's entire book *Strategy* without any particular reference: "The Making of Soviet Strategy," in Peter Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), 665. John Erickson remarks that Svechin favored attrition in "Koalitsionnaya Voina: Coalition Warfare in Soviet Military Theory, Planning, and Performance," in Keith Neilson and Roy A. Prete, eds., *Coalition Warfare: An Uneasy Accord* (Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1983), 101. David Glantz contrasts Tukhachevskii's advocacy of annihilation with Svechin's preference for attrition in "The Intellectual Dimension of Soviet (Russian) Operational Art," in McKercher and Hennessy, *Operational Art*, 128; see also David M. Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus: The Red Army on the Eve of World War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 82-3. Shimon Naveh referred to Svechin's "perception of the future war as one of static attrition" and his attachment to

To be clear, this essay argues that Svechin did not in fact advocate the supremacy of attrition over destruction. Instead, Svechin presented attrition and destruction as two different approaches to military operations, either one of which might be superior to the other depending on the concrete circumstances of the moment. Attrition and destruction were, for Svechin, opposites in constant tension, with the precise balance between them varying based on terrain, manpower, technology, and politics. At a particular time under particular circumstances, as in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, attrition might be superior to annihilation. Under different circumstances, that relation could and did change. Svechin's studies of military history and past military theorists attempt to elucidate that shifting balance of strategies over time. His own theoretical works emphasize the need for careful sensitivity to concrete reality. Finally, Svechin's own analysis of Russia's recent military past, particularly the 1916 offensive by Russian General Aleksei Brusilov, reveals him as an advocate of bold strategies of destruction, at least under the proper circumstances.

Svechin and the Marxists

Generally speaking, Soviet sources did not fall into the trap of reading Svechin as a one-sided advocate of attrition. In 1966, N. Pavlenko fully appreciated Svechin's careful weighing of the pros and cons of all modes of warfare, and the dependence on circumstances of the proper approach at any particular time.⁷ The centenary of Svechin's birth brought an appreciative essay by A. Ageev in the *Military-Historical Journal*, which conceded that Svechin's works were "not in the strictest sense of the word Marxist," but applauded their erudition and insight, along with the author's ability to largely overcome his unfortunate bourgeois background. Svechin's *Strategy* was studied in Soviet military higher education until its replacement in the early 1960s by V. D. Sokolovskii's *Military Strategy*.⁸ While Ageev criticized Svechin's adoption of Delbrück's categories of attrition and destruction, his claim was not

"nineteenth-century notions of attrition and limited warfare" in *In Pursuit of Military Excellence: The Evolution of Operational Theory* (Oxford: Frank Cass, 1997), 180-181. Richard Harrison calls Svechin "an unabashed defender of the strategy of attrition" in *Russian Way of War*, 129. Earl Ziemke argues Svechin believed "war of attrition was inescapable in the currently prevailing circumstances and battle of annihilation would only be fought, if at all, when one side or the other was near exhaustion," but does not cite Svechin to support this, only a Soviet collected work: A. B. Kadishchev, *Voprosy strategii i operativnogo iskusstva v sovetskikh voennykh trudakh* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1965), 14-16, in *The Red Army 1918-1941: From Vanguard of World Revolution to US Ally* (London: Frank Cass, 2004), 167 and 367, fn. 63. See also James J. Schneider, "Svechin, Aleksandr Andreyevich," *Encyclopedia of Russian History* (New York: Thomson Gale, 2004), 4:1505.

7. N. Pavlenko, "Some Questions Concerning the Development of Strategic Theory in the 1920s," in David M. Glantz and Harold S. Orenstein, eds., *The Evolution of Soviet Operational Art, 1927-1991: The Documentary Basis* (London: Frank Cass, 1995), II:76-77.

8. V. D. Sokolovskii, *Voennaia strategiiia* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1962), published in English by the RAND Corporation as *Soviet Military Strategy* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1963).

that Svechin had mistakenly emphasized one form over another, but that the very division between the concepts was overly scholastic and artificial (in Svechin's defense, he clearly saw the need for flexibility in the choice of strategy).⁹ The 1979 *Soviet Military Encyclopedia* awarded Svechin a brief but positive entry, noting his transition from imperial officer to Soviet theorist, and judging that his work was marked by its "richness of factual material, breadth of presentation of questions, and deep analysis, and to this day retains its intellectual significance," and making no claims for him as a partisan of some particular sort of warfare.¹⁰

Once Mikhail Gorbachev took power in the Kremlin in 1985, military reformers urged a fundamental rethinking of Soviet military doctrine, which had long been biased towards offensive action. These new thinkers pushed for a more defensive orientation in Soviet military policy, employing historical examples and theoreticians to bolster their case. Andrei Kokoshin and V. Larionov, for example, used the 1943 battle of Kursk to argue for the advisability of a defensive strategy.¹¹ Kokoshin, one of the few civilians to hold high positions in the Ministry of Defense in the Gorbachev and Yeltsin eras, brought Svechin to bear, given Svechin's more balanced views of the relationship between offense and defense, in order to justify a more defensive doctrine and force structure. Even when employing Svechin to make a political point, though, Kokoshin did not attempt to turn him into a whole-hearted advocate of attrition or the defense. While noting Svechin's advocacy of a strategy of attrition for the Soviet Union in the 1920s, Kokoshin was quick to point out that contrary to his contemporaries (who were too trusting in the virtues of the offensive) Svechin "viewed offense and defense in their dialectical unity."¹²

What explains this divergence in views—that Westerners see Svechin as an advocate of attrition while Soviets and Russians find him much more balanced? The answer may lie in the influence in the West of one man, one of the few Soviets to condemn Svechin as a partisan of attrition: theorist and commander Mikhail Tukhachevskii. Tukhachevskii's death at Stalin's hands in the 1937 purge of the Red Army's high command made him into a martyr, but his undoubted talents and unjustified execution should not conceal a darker side to his character. The irony is that Tukhachevskii was perfectly willing to use vicious political smears and ideological attacks to further his own position and career. He did just that to Svechin, and Western views of Svechin as an opponent of offensive strategies of destruction are quite similar to some attacks Tukhachevskii mustered against Svechin in the 1920s. In his introduction to a Russian edition of Delbrück's *History of the Military*

9. A. Ageev, "Voennii teoretik i voennii istorik A. A. Svechin," *Voenna-istoricheskii zhurnal*, no. 8 (1978), 126-8.

10. *Sovetskaia voennaia entsiklopediia* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1979), 7:264.

11. A. Kokoshin and V. Larionov, "Kurskaia bitva v svete sovremennoi oboronitel'noi doktriny," *Mirovaia ekonomika i mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia*, no. 8 (1987): 32-40, esp. 37; Michael McGwire, *Perestroika and Soviet National Security* (Washington: Brookings, 1991), 326-329; William Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998), 165-166.

12. Kokoshin, "O voine i politike," 139.

Art, Tukhachevskii detoured to savage Svechin as Delbrück's "wholehearted and unconditional" disciple. He claimed that Svechin viewed "war by attrition as a historical necessity," and condemned him as an imperialist sympathizer. Svechin's views, Tukhachevskii held, were so bizarre as to be explicable only as deliberate efforts to undermine Soviet defenses:

[Svechin's] position is so absurd, so scholastic, that it forces us to consider the question: what is it exactly that hides behind these exotic flowers of fantasy, what is its true essence, covered by these theoretical conceptions? The answer is that the basic leitmotif of Svechin's strategy, beyond his lack of understanding of the use of dialectical materialism, is his bowing before the strength and stability of the capitalist world and raising the form of the positional period of the imperialist war into an 'eternal truth' without accounting for later technical and social developments.

Svechin was, in essence, "a conduit for the influence of bourgeois ideology on the theory of military art."¹³

This essay does not simply argue that Tukhachevskii was wrong, and that it is incorrect to see Svechin as a partisan of attrition. Instead it seeks to explain *why* that view is incorrect, an explanation that also helps us to understand the vicious attacks of Svechin's Bolshevik contemporaries. Svechin fell short of Bolshevik standards of ideological rectitude because he was an *evolutionary* thinker instead of a properly *dialectical* one. Though this distinction may appear at first glance to be subtle to the point of meaninglessness, it had real significance in the environment of Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union. Quite strikingly, evolution (in Russian, *evoliutsiia*) appears again and again in Svechin's writings and in the titles of his important works. His major work on military history is the *Evolution of Military Art*; his best appraisal of previous thinkers is the "Evolution of Strategic Theories"; his analysis of Russia's World War I strategy is the "Evolution of Strategic Deployment." In using this term, however, Svechin was not an evolutionary thinker in the Darwinian sense. There was no parallel in his thought to the struggle of individuals and species to survive and propagate themselves. By evolution, Svechin meant slow and gradual changes in response to an altered environment (thus having some parallels to Darwinism), but an environment altered by politics, economics, and technology in the case of warfare. The proper approach to war at one particular moment and circumstance could be utterly inappropriate to another moment and another circumstance. To Svechin, the essential flaw in far too many theorists and generals was their inability to recognize that times and conditions changed, and strategy and tactics had to change with them. For Svechin, then, the undeniable constant was that in war there were no constants; everything always changed.¹⁴

13. Mikhail Tukhachevskii, "Predislovie k knige G. Del'briuka," *Izbrannye proizvedeniia* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1964), 2:134, 138, 144.

14. See Kipp, "Two Views," 62. Kipp similarly sees Svechin's emphasis on the relation of the military art to circumstance, but describes this as a Hegelian dialectic. This essay takes a different

Well before the Russian Revolution made it politically necessary for Russian thinkers to embrace Marxism and dialectical approaches, Svechin recognized the inapplicability of general laws. In 1907 he wrote

The great commanders, like all successful practitioners, were above all sons of their age. In Napoleon's epoch it would be fatal to imitate the techniques of Frederick the Great, and now the application of the techniques of Napoleon's epoch will lead only to failure. Successful action must first be appropriate to time and place, and for that it must be in accord with contemporary conditions. . . . If our understandings do not change in correspondence with the progress of the military art, if we stay frozen to one point and bow before unchanging laws, we gradually lose sight of the essence of things. Deep ideas become harmful prejudices.¹⁵

Put in these terms of constant shifts in response to altered circumstances, Svechin's approach shares Marxism's materialism: the concept that material conditions are fundamental to human behavior and human institutions. As Marx himself expressed the idea,

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political, and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.¹⁶

Nothing in this emphasis on material reality was at odds with Svechin's own views, and under the Soviets Svechin attempted to harmonize his beliefs with Marxism wherever possible. He went out of his way to attack military idealism—the belief that better morale or fighting spirit could and should overcome the material realities of numbers, technology, and tactics. He savagely attacked tsarist general and military historian A. M. Zaionchkovskii as an “ultra-idealist” for his neglect of concrete material factors in warfare.¹⁷

view, given the way in which Hegel's dialectic represented history as having a clear direction and goal, while Svechin's evolution lacked any defined goal or end point.

15. Svechin, *Predrassudki i boevaiia deistvitel'nost'* (St. Petersburg: Berezovskii, 1907), excerpted in *Postizhenie voennogo iskusstva: Ideinoe nasledie A. Svechina* (Moscow: Russkii put', 1999), 70.

16. Karl Marx, Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), in Robert Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: Norton, 1972), 4.

17. A. Svechin, “Evolutsiia operativnogo razvertyvaniia,” *Voina i revoliutsiia*, no. 5 (1926), p. 4.

But for all Svechin's acceptance of change through time as a result of changing material conditions, he was not a Marxist and was correctly recognized as such by his Soviet contemporaries and those who came after them. Certainly, much of the criticism of Svechin by his Soviet contemporaries was self-evidently unfair. As one Soviet later pointed out, Svechin had even been attacked for the sin of studying history in chronological order.¹⁸ But however vicious its tone, much Soviet work accurately noted Svechin's fundamentally non-Marxist approach. Mikhail Tukhachevskii declared flatly that

In the period of NEP, Svechin began a sort of "Change of Signposts" course [a movement among non-Marxist Russian intellectuals to accept Bolshevik rule as legitimate], and some considered that Svechin was trying to become a little bit Marxist. Of course, this could be only the greatest mistake. Svechin was not a Marxist and never intended to be one. . . . If Svechin was obliged, disguising himself, to apply Marxist terminology, to put on a Marxist costume, that was only because otherwise it would have been impossible for him to promulgate his views.¹⁹

Tukhachevskii went on to twist and distort Svechin's views in an unfair and irresponsible manner, but he was correct on at least one point: Svechin's approach missed key elements of Marxist thinking. For one, Svechin lacked a good Bolshevik commitment to the inevitability and centrality of revolution, and he was chided for that. In Svechin's article on the need for Soviet Russia to rid itself of notions of geographic and climactic invulnerability, the editors of *Military Thought and Revolution* noted that his "basically correct position" took an "exclusively geographic point-of-view" and failed to grasp that "any war against the USSR is a war against proletarian revolution, i.e. a civil war. The outcome of such a war will be conditioned on the real correlation of international forces [that is, the assistance of the proletariat of other countries] in comparison with which territorial successes alone cannot have vital significance."²⁰

Intellectually, Svechin tried to portray himself as a Marxist, but he did not convince his Soviet critics and, one gets the impression, he did not convince himself. He proclaimed his allegiance to the dialectic, but he meant something quite different than Marxism's understanding of the dialectic as a teleological process of necessary development towards some pre-ordained end. By dialectic, Svechin had in mind the productive clash, interplay and resulting shift between ideas—in the case, offense or defense, attrition or annihilation. In 1930, for

18. I. Rostunov, "Sovetskaia voennaia istoriografiia v mezhvoennoi period," *Voenna-istoricheskaia zhurnal*, no. 11 (1967), 91.

19. Mikhail Tukhachevskii, "O strategicheskikh vzgliadakh prof. Svechina," in *Protiv reaktsionnykh teorii*, 5, 7. On the irony of Tukhachevskii, later a victim of political machinations, victimizing Svechin, see A. A. Kokoshin, "A. A. Svechin: O voine i politike," *Mezhdunarodnaia zhizn'*, no. 10 (1988), 134.

20. A. Svechin, "Opasnye illiuzii," *Voennaia mysl' i revoliutsiia*, no. 2 (1924), 44.

example, he dismissed formal bourgeois logic as clearly inferior to dialectical reasoning. Formal logic, treating categories as rigid and unchanging, led thinkers seriously astray: “The speed of evolution of the military art that we sense only underlines how the dialectic penetrates the entire sphere of military affairs and makes up its essence, how weak the methods of formal logic are in discussing military art and what a dangerous path this formal logic can divert us towards.” Bourgeois thought, Svechin said, attempted to reduce military matters to “eternal principles,” but those simply did not exist.²¹

But Svechin’s allegiance to change and his aversion to eternal, invariable principles did not in itself make Svechin a Marxist. His dialectic—in effect, a dialogue between two opposing principles—lacked a central element of Marxist thinking: its directionality. Svechin’s dialectic, like Darwinian evolution, lacked any fixed goal or end. Material circumstances changed and the military art changed with them, but their movement was a random walk, not purposeful. Marxism, particularly as interpreted in the Soviet Union, saw progress towards the ultimate triumph of the proletariat and world revolution: in other words, history had a direction. As Stalin put it in 1938, “the dialectical method holds that the process of development must be understood not as movement in a circle, not as simple repetition of what has come before, but as movement forward, as movement upward, as a transition from an old qualitative state to a new qualitative state, as a development from simple to complex, from lower to higher.”²² Svechin had room to maneuver in the somewhat more open atmosphere of the 1920s, but with Stalin’s rise to power, interpretations of Marxism became increasingly rigid and the space for views such as Svechin’s disappeared. Svechin did not share Marxism’s confidence in history’s progress towards proletarian revolution, and that hurt him in Lenin and Stalin’s Soviet Union. Decades after Svechin’s death, when it again became safe in the Soviet Union to discuss him in reasonably objective terms, Soviet historians recognized him as an incisive thinker and master of his factual material. Nonetheless, I. Rostunov, the leading Soviet historian of World War I, found that Svechin never gave a “genuinely materialist interpretation” of military history.²³

Svechin was indeed not a Marxist. He was instead best described as an historicist, much like Delbrück, whom Svechin deeply admired and from whom he took so much. Even in the Soviet period, Svechin was highly complimentary to Delbrück’s insights.²⁴ This historicism—the insistence that the past must be judged on its own terms, that each age and culture has its own nature and ethos, that ideas and values cannot be arbitrarily applied across distance in time—lay at

21. “Tsennost’ voenno-istoricheskoi podgotovki komandira,” *Krasnaia zvezda*, 1 May 1930, in *Postizbenie*, 502-3.

22. Joseph Stalin, “O dialekticheskom i istoricheskom materializme,” *Pravda*, 12 September 1938.

23. I. Rostunov, “U istokov sovetskoi voennoi istoriografii,” *Voенно-istoricheskii zhurnal*, no. 8 (1967), 91.

24. Svechin, *Evolutsiia voennogo iskusstva* (Moscow-Leningrad: Gosizdat, 1927), I:20-21.

the foundation for Svechin's rejection of eternal and unchanging laws of war. In the same way, these concepts also lie at the heart of his rejection of the inherent superiority or inferiority of one form of war over another.

The Evolution of Attrition and Annihilation

The very idea that one form of warfare could be regarded as inherently superior runs contrary to the complexity and subtlety of Svechin's thinking, which at every turn rejected rigid, doctrinaire, or one-sided approaches. In particular, Svechin repeatedly criticized previous theorists for their unthinking adherence to a particular approach regardless of circumstances or conditions. That said, his approach to past thinkers was not to measure them against an unchanging standard of correct or incorrect views, but instead on whether they were capable of perceiving the reality that surrounded them. "It would be unjust," he said, "if we were to see our task in condemning or awarding laurel wreaths to the thinkers of the past."²⁵ Indeed, the systematic study of military history made sense only in a context of constant change that required breadth and perspective. A static world would indeed permit the luxury of analyzing the world as it was, and then stopping upon reaching a universally valid conclusion. But in reality, "the significance of military history grows colossally when each passing month forces us to account for new facts, changing the very basis for the conduct of battle—whether it's the tank or the revolutionary movement, self-propelled artillery accompanying infantry, or the transition from individual to collective farming."²⁶ He regarded the value of his military history in providing perspective and breadth, and his Soviet interpreters recognized that. Rostunov saw that Svechin "did not pretend to provide aid in the resolution of concrete strategic or tactical problems." Instead, military history was "to broaden the field of vision of Soviet military cadres, arm them with knowledge of the rational development of the military art, develop their capability for independent military thought," or as Kokoshin put it, to "stimulate and develop independent thinking," not "to present rules and recommendations ready for all circumstances."²⁷

Svechin's culminating work *Strategy* lays out various approaches to military operations. "Military actions," he writes, "may take various forms: destruction and attrition, defense and attack, maneuver and positional warfare. Each of these forms influences significantly the strategic line of conduct." The choice among these, however, is not predetermined by the inherent superiority or inferiority of any particular approach. Instead, "the political leadership has the obligation, after attentive consultation with strategists, to direct military action at the front

25. Svechin, "Evolutsiia strategicheskikh teorii," in B. Gorev, ed., *Voina i voennoe iskusstvo v svete istoricheskogo materializma* (Moscow-Leningrad: Gosizdat, 1927), 62.

26. "Tsennost' voenno-istoricheskoi podgotovki komandira," *Krasnaia zvezda*, 1 May 1930, in *Postizhenie*, 503.

27. Rostunov, "U istokov," 91; A. A. Kokoshin, "A. A. Svechin: O voine i politike," *Mezhdunarodnaia zhizn'*, no. 10 (1988), 135.

to destruction or to attrition. The contradiction between these forms is far deeper, more important, and carries more significant consequences than the contradiction between attack and defense.”²⁸

Destruction/annihilation is simpler; it turns questions of strategy into questions of operations: destroy the enemy forces utterly, and strategy becomes superfluous. On the other hand, it requires extraordinary decisiveness on the part of the commander to recognize the proper moment to act and to have the moral courage to act. It also puts the army seeking total victory into a vulnerable position, as failure to achieve that victory will leave it extended, out of supplies, and liable to destruction itself. The enemy army must itself be vulnerable to being trapped and destroyed completely, for otherwise it may retreat out of danger. Thus the choice of a strategy of destruction is predicated on particular circumstances: “If the means at hand are completely inappropriate for the given situation, then it is necessary to abandon destruction.”²⁹ The point here, though, is that Svechin has presented conditions for the use or rejection of a strategy of destruction; it is not inherently inferior to attrition.

At times, Svechin’s attitude towards a strategy of annihilation is quite positive. A strategy of destruction, he writes, rather than sparring indecisively with an enemy, “strives to avoid fencing and has a single means to do this: the constant and energetic development of its own blow directed at the most vital center of the enemy; the more concentrated and massive our own fist, the sooner the enemy is forced to orient his own actions to ours, i.e., in the old saying ‘we will dictate operational laws to the enemy.’”³⁰ Attrition, by contrast, surrenders initiative. “The limited blows by which a strategy of attrition is carried out,” Svechin holds, “constrain the enemy to a far lesser degree” than a strategy of destruction, and “the enemy has the full capability of pursuing his own objective in this game of operational deployments.”³¹ That said, Svechin suggested that modern conditions put some obstacles in the path of successful use of destruction: the speed of modern warfare required operational pauses to enable railroad and supply nets to catch up, while total mobilization of society meant that single campaigns, however successful, might not exhaust a state’s ability to resist.³² By contrast to the relative simplicity of a campaign aimed at the total and rapid destruction of an enemy, Svechin saw a strategy of attrition as complex, given the range of means and targets available. It did not offer the luxury of focusing exclusively on the destruction of an enemy’s main forces.³³ Contrary to the notion that Svechin believed attrition inherently superior to destruction, he argued instead that “the difficult path of a

28. Svechin, *Strategiia*, 414-415 [240]. Translations from *Strategiia* are my own; page references are to *Strategiia* (Moscow: Kulikovo pole, 2003). Page numbers in brackets are to the relevant passages of the 1992 Eastview English-language edition.

29. *Strategiia*, 415-418 [240-241].

30. *Strategiia*, 421-22 [243].

31. *Strategiia* 433 [248].

32. *Strategiia*, 424 [244].

33. *Strategiia* 427-28 [246].

strategy of attrition, leading to the expenditure of far greater means than a short destructive blow at the enemy's heart, is generally chosen only when a war cannot be finished at one stroke."³⁴

While *Strategy* presented Svechin's theoretical and contemporary ideas on attrition and destruction, his more historically-oriented works similarly saw change and shifting balances as inherent to warfare, and resisted any notion of the inherent superiority of particular modes of warfare. In early modern Europe, Svechin argued, most campaigns used attrition through maneuver; as Machiavelli himself noted, it was safer than risking a cause to the uncertainty of battle. The great Gustavus Adolphus could count on 10,000 new recruits a year—an impressive number for the early 1600s, but not nearly enough to risk a strategy of annihilation. Napoleonic destruction, however effective for Napoleon, was simply impossible for the smaller armies of seventeenth century Europe. Only once armies reached the vast size created by the French Revolution could commanders dare to risk the catastrophic losses a battle of annihilation might produce. The ultimate failure in the Great Northern War (1700-1721) of King Charles XII of Sweden, a gifted battlefield commander, was a result of his attempt to pursue “a strategy of annihilation under completely unsuitable circumstances.”³⁵

Svechin's discussion of military theory, like his discussion of military history, emphasized evolution over time. Take, for example, his contrasting views of English theorist Henry Humphrey Evans Lloyd (1718-1783) and the German Dietrich Heinrich von Bülow (1757-1807). Writing in the milieu of the cabinet wars and relatively small armies of the eighteenth century, Lloyd emphasized the limits of armies' capabilities, and the wisdom of avoiding battle and letting supply problems and disease win victory through attrition. Svechin endorsed Lloyd's approach not because attrition was inherently a better strategy, but because it was appropriate to the time and circumstances: Lloyd's “theory, devised as a theory of the Seven Years' War, was in many respects correct for the conditions of that war.”³⁶ Svechin was not as kind to Bülow, who grasped the importance of the French Revolution and the new mass armies that the revolution made possible, but was nonetheless marked by the geometrical thinking of the eighteenth century. He clung to attrition through maneuver as the ideal strategy, not realizing the “evolution from Frederick's attrition, with its preference for maneuver, to Napoleon's destruction, with the all-deciding extraordinary victory in battle. Bülow's beloved methods were flanking positions, offering a threat to enemy communications, and other bloodless means. This is correct for certain stages of attrition, but to make such positions into a dogma . . . was, of course, mistaken.”³⁷ Napoleon's strategy of annihilation, by contrast, was appropriate to and possible only in an age of mass armies.³⁸

34. *Strategiia*, 431 [247].

35. *Evolutsiia voennogo iskusstva*, 174, 188, 190, 228, 259, 287.

36. Svechin, “Evolutsiia strategicheskikh teorii,” 57-58, 62.

37. “Evolutsiia strategicheskikh teorii,” 65-66.

38. *Evolutsiia voennogo iskusstva*, vol. I, 335.

The same German historicism that shaped Delbrück had earlier formed Clausewitz, and Svechin clearly regarded Clausewitz as much as Delbrück as a kindred spirit. This was not a merely a matter of their social background as military professionals from Europe's Old Regime—after all, Lenin himself admired Clausewitz as a military theorist, and many Bolsheviks followed his lead. The most important link between Svechin and Clausewitz was their shared appreciation of the complexity of war as a social phenomenon, and as a result the impossibility of reducing it to eternal truths or simple, universally applicable principles. The proper role of the military theorist was not to prescribe, but to inculcate habits of clear thinking. As Svechin saw it,

If the eighteenth century divided the practice of the military art into good and bad, depending on whether it corresponded or not with the 'eternal principles' of the particular moment, Clausewitz saw that each epoch had its own conditions which any particular approach would have to accommodate. The conduct of war before the French Revolution was neither bad nor reprehensible, but corresponded to the character of its epoch, determined by real conditions.

While lesser thinkers rushed to condemn the attrition-based strategies of the eighteenth century, Clausewitz did not fall into that trap.³⁹

Svechin's endorsement of Clausewitz required some effort to harmonize with Clausewitz's clear preference for strategies of destruction. As Svechin conceded, Clausewitz "directed all his talent at characterizing the strategy of annihilation; among all the goals which one might pursue in war, Clausewitz always underlined the one goal that dominated all others—the destruction of the vital force of the enemy, and the necessity of winning not an ordinary battle but a great victory by means of an enveloping attack or attacking a turned flank, which alone would allow the pure destruction of the enemy."⁴⁰ While Svechin was not as opposed to strategies of destruction and annihilation as is often perceived, he certainly saw attrition as a viable and at times preferable strategy. He contextualized Clausewitz's bent for strategies of annihilation as a reaction against more bloodless approaches of the eighteenth century, but emphasized Clausewitz's sensitivity to context and circumstance:

equal with this tradition of Napoleonic annihilation, which Clausewitz interprets for future generations, he notes that the variety of concrete circumstances is extraordinarily great, and that in each particular case it is necessary to take a decision based not on any sort of theoretical position, but exclusively on the characteristic particulars for the given concrete situation. Annihilation is not feasible in every war, and thus one may be forced to apply contrary methods of action.⁴¹

39. "Evoliutsiia strategicheskikh teorii," 69.

40. "Evoliutsiia strategicheskikh teorii," 72.

41. "Evoliutsiia strategicheskikh teorii," 72.

Svechin illustrated this by Clausewitz's own work on Prussian contingency plans for war with France. When Prussia enjoyed the advantage of allies, Clausewitz thought in terms of an overwhelming drive on Paris. When political circumstances were not as promising, Clausewitz planned a limited campaign to occupy Belgium and then go over to the defensive.⁴²

Svechin was kinder than one might expect to Antoine Henri Jomini (1779-1869), Clausewitz's chief rival as a theorist in the late nineteenth century. Jomini's rigidly geometric approach and emphasis on strategies of annihilation would, it seems, make him an easy target for Svechin. Instead, Svechin hinted that Jomini might be considerably more subtle than his later adherents and detractors suggested. He suggested that those following in Jomini's tradition took his ideas much too far:

Jomini's works pushed military thought towards the recognition of a Napoleonic strategy of annihilation as the only correct one, and towards the condemnation of other commanders to the extent that they did not hold to the principle of annihilation. Jomini himself, however, did not commit such a crude error.⁴³

As Svechin neared his own time, his verdicts on military theorists continued to praise flexibility and sensitivity to circumstances while condemning blind dogmatism. In the context of a broader discussion of Sigismund von Schlichting (1829-1909), Svechin argued that the real "genius" of Helmuth von Moltke (the Elder, 1800-1891) was "his taking into account new material conditions in which to carry out the military art, and correspondingly changing his methods," despite the criticism he suffered from contemporaries for failing to live up to Napoleonic standards.⁴⁴ Schlichting himself fell victim to excessive rigidity, failing to recognize and adapt to the changes that took place after Moltke the Elder's era.

When examining the twentieth century, Svechin indeed saw a tendency towards the superiority of attrition over destruction. Nonetheless, he did not regard this as permanent, for the rate of change in military affairs was only increasing. In *The Evolution of Military Art*, he wrote that "the pace of evolution in our time has so greatly accelerated that in the course of a single war we can observe this evolutionary dynamic. Both the world war and civil war of recent years represent quite complex phenomena; the military art at various moments in them stood at different levels, and we do not have the right to look at them statically, as something determined and unmoving."⁴⁵ Furthermore, certain campaigns and wars showed the continuing potential of destruction. The Russo-Turkish War (1877-1878) for Svechin illustrated the positive results that could come from energetic campaigns.⁴⁶ That said, the power and capability of the modern state, even as it

42. "Evolutsiia strategicheskikh teorii," 73.

43. "Evolutsiia strategicheskikh teorii," 80; *Evolutsiia voennogo iskusstva*, vol. I, 342.

44. "Evolutsiia strategicheskikh teorii," 89.

45. Svechin, *Evolutsiia voennogo iskusstva*, vol. I, 12.

46. *Evolutsiia voennogo iskusstva*, vol. II, 409.

created the large armies that had permitted strategies of destruction in the era after the French Revolution, gave armies colossal endurance and survivability. Despite the emphasis that plans typically placed on initial clashes at the border, “the evolution of the contemporary life of the state more and more turns the soldier at the front into an advance guard, the fate of which is only one part of a nation’s struggle.” The Crimean War and the American Civil War both showed the importance of strategies of attrition to their ultimate resolution. “Do not,” Svechin asked rhetorically, “all contemporary technology and economics push towards a strategy of attrition?”⁴⁷ An extended discussion of the mobilization possibilities of contemporary states led him to conclude the “probability that future wars, particularly their initial stages, will be in the style of attrition.”⁴⁸

Svechin made a similar point with regard to the defense of the Soviet Union itself. As Jacob Kipp has noted, Svechin argued in 1924 for the greater suitability of a strategy of attrition to defend the Soviet Union.⁴⁹ Indeed, Svechin attacked the tsarist general and military historian A. M. Zaionchkovskii for his failure to recognize how circumstances had changed, but what is significant here is the way in which Svechin employs *evolutionary* concepts to attack Zaionchkovskii’s commitment to a strategy of annihilation:

The development of the Russian state (and incidentally, of other states) slowly increased its preparation for a lengthy war: attrition, not destruction. This process advanced unnoticed even for the very leaders of reform in the army. Zaionchkovskii recognizes only a strategy of annihilation . . . but the rigorous evolution which the author does not recognize presents him with a shift towards attrition in Russian preparations for mobilization.

For Svechin, Zaionchkovskii’s position, by refusing to see the material changes that dictate a change in strategy, “means rejecting evolution, tilting at windmills, being an incorrigible idealist and holding in contempt the material basis for action.”⁵⁰ For Svechin, then, the real sin is not adherence to maneuver and destruction, but rejecting the lessons offered by material reality.

Svechin’s Soviet critics, though happy to enumerate his sins, generally *failed* to accuse him of arguing for the universal superiority of attrition. At the 1931 session devoted to a systematic demolition of his authority, one Nizhechek, summarizing the results of the harangues, proclaimed “It is well-known that Svechin in all his works insistently pushes his idea of war by attrition as the single possible means

47. *Evolutsiia voennogo iskusstva*, vol. II, 544, 546. M. V. Frunze, who ran the Red Army from Lev Trotsky’s ouster until his death in 1925, argued the same point about the endurance of modern armies and modern societies in his essay “Front i tyl v voine budushchego,” in P. Karatygin, ed., *Obschie osnovy mobilizatsii promyshlennosti dlia nuzhd voiny* (Moscow: Voennyi vestnik, 1925).

48. A. Svechin, “Strategicheskie i operativnye etudi,” *Sbornik voennoi akademii RKKA im. M. V. Frunze*, vol. 1 (Moscow, 1926), in *Postizhenie*, 371-2.

49. Kipp, “Two Views,” 67.

50. “Evolutsiia operativnogo razvertyvaniia,” 24.

of conducting war *in our strategic epoch* [emphasis added],⁵¹ thus not necessarily other times and circumstances. Even Tukhachevskii, despite his merciless attacks on Svechin, at this point conceded that Svechin was not an advocate of a strategy of attrition in all times and circumstances. Instead, “Svechin considers that each epoch corresponds either to a strategy of attrition or a strategy of annihilation. In particular, he carries this theory through to our time and says that war in the imperialist epoch, and in particular the imperialist war of 1914-1918, developed in conditions of attrition, that annihilation was impossible, that only by attrition was it possible to achieve this or that result . . .”⁵² Tukhachevskii, who never missed an opportunity to attack Svechin, did not at this time attack him for one-sided adherence to attrition under all times and circumstances, but instead for adherence to attrition when, in Tukhachevskii’s view, the conditions for massive and decisive action were indeed present.

Taking Svechin’s limited claims for the superiority of attrition in the particular case of Russia for the early part of the twentieth century, and reading them as general maxims for the universal superiority of attrition over destruction, or of defense over offense, is deeply mistaken. Svechin’s creative work was closed down in the Soviet Union just when industrialization was beginning to provide the Red Army with the masses of tanks and aircraft that might make a strategy of destruction possible once again. Indeed, there are tantalizing hints that Svechin was beginning to see the ways in which technology would change the nature of warfare. In 1924, for example, in “Dangerous Illusions,” he argued that it was foolish for Soviet policymakers and military thinkers to emulate their Russian forebears and presume that “endless Russian territory, providing a broad space for retreat; inability of a foreign enemy to reach Russia’s political center; and the Russian winter, which will halt any invasion” together rendered their country invulnerable to attack. A drive on Moscow from the Western border would require occupying over 200,000 sq km of land, but Napoleon had managed such a feat. “We must keep in mind,” Svechin wrote, “that the telegraph, radio, aviation, automobiles—all modern technology—are great devourers of space.”⁵³

On the related question of the superiority of offense over defense, or vice-versa, Svechin maintained a nuanced position quite similar to his views on attrition versus destruction. While he was generally inclined to see the defense as more powerful, this view was always dependent on particular technological, political, and material conditions. Though Svechin attributed to Clausewitz the view that defense was the strongest form of warfare, Svechin himself only endorsed that position in a highly qualified way. “We do not think,” he wrote, “that recognition of the defense as the strongest form of warfare is a mistake,

51. Nizhechek, “Zakliuchitel’naia rech” in *Protiv reaktsionnykh teorii na voenno-nauchnom fronte: Kritika strategicheskikh i voennoistoricheskikh vzgliadov Prof. Svechina* (Moscow: Gos. Voen. Izdat, 1931), 98.

52. Tukhachevskii, “O strategicheskikh vzgliadakh,” 14.

53. Svechin, “Opasnye illiuzii,” 49-51; see also Kokoshin, “Svechin,” 140.

at least in the conditions of a Europe not caught in the midst of revolutionary upheaval.” Revolutionary warfare might change this equation, for “in the epoch of the French Revolution, its slogans made the offensive the strongest form of warfare,” but only until about 1805.⁵⁴ Even if this statement about the offensive potential of revolutionary warfare does not reflect Svechin’s true views, but was instead dictated by his position in the service of an avowedly revolutionary Soviet Union, the fact remains that Svechin’s thought saw the balance between offense and defense shifting repeatedly over time. He saw no grounds for general laws of the superiority of one form over another.

A full appraisal of Svechin makes it clear that he saw offense and defense as intricately interconnected. In Svechin’s discussion of Clausewitz’s ideas, his nuanced views are clear. Both offensive and defensive actions are appropriate, with perhaps the most powerful form of military action being defense followed at the precisely correct moment by a counteroffensive. As Svechin phrased it,

Clausewitz saw defense as the strongest form of warfare, but conducted only for the achievement of negative goals, while offense is the weakest form but aims at positive goals. . . . A study of history obviously confirms the rationality of defensive action by the weaker side. . . . Strategically, defense permits the use of borders and the depth of the theater, which forces the attacker to waste strength occupying territory and expend time passing through it, while every bit of time won is a victory for the defense. The defender harvests what he did not sow, since the offense is often halted by faulty intelligence data, false rumors, and inertia. To the aid of the defender come second and third-line troops: *landwehr* and militia. With each step forward, the offensive weakens. Despite the simplicity and clarity of Clausewitz’s thought, the majority of writers before the World War worshipped the offensive at any cost, and the seizure of initiative. As a result, they concluded that Clausewitz was mistaken on this point. We need to keep in mind that Clausewitz meant by defense not passive inactivity, but instead the endurance of the enemy’s first blow, which ought when possible to be followed by a strong riposte, an answering blow by the defense. . . . The necessity which Clausewitz indicates, given sufficient strength, to set a positive goal clearly underlines the requirement to go over to the offensive as soon as previous defensive action creates on our side a predominance of force. A strong, sudden transition from defense to offense, a shining riposte—this is the highest achievement of the military art.⁵⁵

Offensive and defensive operations each had their place, depending on circumstances and objective. Svechin described, for example, the eighteenth-century military theorist Henry Humphrey Evans Lloyd as regarding defense

54. “Evolutsiia strategicheskikh teorii,” 73-74.

55. *Evolutsiia voennogo iskusstva*, 227-8; see also the closely related discussion in Jon Sumida, *Decoding Clausewitz: A New Approach to On War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 153-175.

as superior, but attributed these views to the particular circumstances of Lloyd's era: small armies and stable frontiers.⁵⁶ The ultimate question was political: "we differentiate between offensive and defensive operations depending on whether the strategy advances a positive or negative goal for the operation." This decision in turn depends on circumstances: "The pursuit of negative aims, i.e. a struggle to preserve, requires generally speaking less outlay of strength and resources than the pursuit of positive aims, i.e. a struggle to seize, to move forward. . . . the weaker side, naturally, will turn to defense."⁵⁷ The choice of defense is not inherently superior, but instead as dependent on circumstances as the choice of attrition. "For defense to succeed," Svechin writes, "we need to be able to lose territory, and we need to have time working in our favor." While large states have more territory to lose, Svechin does not leap to the conclusion that states like Russia ought naturally to choose the strategic defense. It is necessary in addition to have "a decisive government and a strong internal position in order to have the possibility to weather the material losses connected with an enemy offensive and to force time to work in our favor"⁵⁸ Svechin likewise sees the choice of positional as opposed to maneuver warfare as dictated by political aims and not the inherent superiority of one form of warfare to another. Positive aims produce mobile warfare; negative aims produce positional warfare. Coalition wars tend to positional warfare, as each party seeks to reduce its own expenditure of effort and freeloading on its partners. Poor preparation for war produces positional warfare.⁵⁹

Svechin and Brusilov

What has come before should demonstrate that Svechin was *not* the rigid adherent of attrition which he too often appears to be in Western literature. One might object, though, that Svechin's general arguments for the usefulness of offensive campaigns, or tactics of destruction or annihilation, are pointless if in his own contemporary context, Russia in the early twentieth century, he saw attrition alone as a realistic option. Could it be, in other words, that his philosophical openness to other approaches is meaningless if in practical terms he saw Russia's only options as defensive warfare based on attrition?

The problem with this approach is that Svechin publicly endorsed and advocated aggressive Russian tactics and risky offensives in the service of a campaign of annihilation. The circumstances involved the 1916 Brusilov offensive, an attack launched by the imperial Russian army's South-Western Front under the command of General Aleksei Alekseevich Brusilov against the Germans and Austro-Hungarians in present-day Ukraine. Brusilov's innovative leadership and tactical innovations produced a stunning success, tsarist Russia's greatest of the First World War. Brusilov's offensive broke Austria-Hungary as an independent

56. "Evolutsiia strategicheskikh teorii," 58.

57. *Strategiia*, 437-438.

58. *Strategiia*, 441 [251].

59. *Strategiia*, 445-6 [253-4].

force while netting hundreds of thousands of German and Austrian prisoners.⁶⁰

As the Soviet military drew on limited elements of tsarist Russia's military experience for its own purposes (and indeed Brusilov continued to serve the Red Army after the revolution), the Brusilov offensive was the object of intensive study, including by Svechin himself. Svechin's verdict on Brusilov, however, was not laudatory. While recognizing Brusilov's achievement, Svechin criticized him for settling for tactical success and incremental gains, and failing to take advantage of an opportunity to shift from attrition to annihilation. In the circumstances of 1916, with both France and Germany drained by the ongoing battle at Verdun and Austria-Hungary increasingly near collapse, the pursuit of annihilation as an operational goal might have created the possibility of a strategic victory. Svechin, the supposed partisan of attrition, criticized Brusilov, Russia's greatest general of World War I, for his failure to abandon attrition for destruction.

The occasion for Svechin's critique was a public meeting of Soviet Russia's Military-Historical Commission to evaluate Brusilov's campaign on 27 August 1920, with the Russian Civil War still raging.⁶¹ Svechin opened the session by stressing the importance and historical significance of what Brusilov's South-Western Front had achieved. Within days of the offensive's opening on 22 May/4 June 1916, the South-Western Front's four constituent armies (from north to south, the 8th, 11th, 7th, and 9th) had torn enormous holes in Austrian lines, inflicting massive casualties and putting the Austrian high command into a state of increasing panic. The northernmost 8th Army, under the command of the Cossack General Aleksei Maksimovich Kaledin, had achieved the greatest success, creating a 30-mile gap before the city of Lutsk, opening the path to the major transportation and communication centers of Kovel' and Lviv (Lvov, Lemberg). Taking either would hinder Austrian withdrawal, and the Austrians lacked any reserves to plug the gap through which Russian divisions poured. Austrian resistance was collapsing, and the moment was ripe for the complete destruction of Austrian forces in Ukraine if only the opportunity could be seized.

But Brusilov made a fateful choice. On 25 May/7 June, as Kaledin's 8th Army had carved out an enormous salient in Austrian lines, Brusilov was still urging Kaledin to "energetically pursue the enemy, not letting him rest. You need to strive to reach the line of the river Styr as quickly as possible. Have your heavy artillery follow, but do not wait for it to attack the retreating enemy, since what you receive as a gift today tomorrow you'll have to fight for."⁶² By the very next day, though, Brusilov

60. While there is an extensive literature on Brusilov in Russian, resources in English are still limited. See Norman Stone, *The Eastern Front, 1914-1917* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1975), 232-263; Graydon Tunstall, "Austria-Hungary and the Brusilov Offensive of 1916," *The Historian* 70, no. 1 (Spring 2008), 30-53; Timothy C. Dowling, *The Brusilov Offensive* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

61. P. V. Cherkasov, ed., *Mirovaia voina 1914-1918: "Lutskii proryv"* (Moscow: Vysshii voennyi redaktsionnyi sovet, 1924), 5.

62. Brusilov to Kaledin, 25 May/7 June 1916, in *Nastuplenie Iugo-zapadnogo fronta v mae-iiune 1916 goda* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1940), doc. 152, 224.

had come to a startling change of heart. While telling his armies that “the tactical successes achieved by the armies of our [South-Western] Front must be turned into a strategically complete operation,” he told Kaledin’s 8th Army, the one with the greatest potential for a strategically vital breakthrough, to “strengthen its positions on the Styr,” that is, where its center elements had achieved the greatest success. Instead of putting his emphasis on exploiting the breakthrough which already had been achieved, Brusilov instead directed the 8th to push ahead on its *flanks*, against unbroken Austrian forces. The advanced center was to halt; the lagging flanks to move ahead. Brusilov placed his heaviest reliance on a cavalry breakthrough (against dug-in infantry) by 8th Army’s IV Cavalry Corps on the right (northern) wing of 8th Army and the entire South-Western Front.⁶³ Svechin saw this as a terrible mistake (though he mistook the date by a day):

The South-Western Front issued a directive for VIII Corps [leading the advance] to halt and the entire 8th Army to even up its lines. As part of this directive, the only unit receiving an active task was IV Cavalry Corps under the famed General Gillenschmidt, racer, sportsman Thus, at a time when on the front of the breakthrough our units moved freely and lacked only cavalry for a deep strike on the enemy rear, on the far right flank a cavalry mass carried out an unnecessary maneuver which produced no results.⁶⁴

The consequences of this failure to exploit opportunity, Svechin held, were enormous.

The general situation on the South-Western Front had developed in such a way that the target was now the entire Austrian army, L’viv, supplies, the entire organization of the army. 25 May/7 June marked the critical moment of the war, at which, if we had enough spirit, we could have broken out of positional war and moved to a broad maneuver operation. However, we did not have enough spirit and instead of taking a leap forward we began to worry about consolidating what the front had already captured. . . . Instead of having laggards catch up with our shining units, we had our units level themselves at mediocrity . . .⁶⁵

Brusilov’s forces resumed their offensive over the following days, but a vital opportunity had been lost. The Austrians and their German allies won time with Brusilov’s interrupted offensive to scrape together reserves to contain Brusilov’s breakthrough and restore equilibrium.

In fact, Svechin was harder on Brusilov than the documentary record can justify. Kaledin, Brusilov’s subordinate, was certainly not a dynamic commander. The Russian high command also bears some responsibility. While Svechin thought that *Stavka* had tried on 27 May/9 June to convince Brusilov to resume his

63. Brusilov to army commanders, 26 May/8 June 1916, *ibid.*, doc. 171, 242.

64. Svechin in Cherkasov, *Lutskii proryv*, 11.

65. *Ibid.*, 12.

offensive, in fact the high command's actual orders to Brusilov on that day endorse Brusilov's plan for 8th Army to expend its strength on ultimately futile efforts by IV Cavalry Corps to push forward on 8th Army's right (northern) flank.⁶⁶ Nonetheless, Brusilov did not dispute Svechin's basic point that an enormous opportunity to turn tactical and operational success into a truly strategic victory had been squandered by failing to exploit 8th Army's breakthrough. Brusilov's forces had attacked dug-in Austrian troops directly rather than bypassing and isolating remaining Austrian centers of resistance. Brusilov, who was present at the discussion and responded to Svechin, could only blame Kaledin, his superiors at *Stavka*, and Russia's other Front commanders for his failure.⁶⁷

The point here is not the justice of Svechin's criticism of Brusilov, but its nature. Brusilov had managed precisely the sort of attritional success typically and incorrectly regarded as what Svechin aimed for—limited and local victories which would, with time and effort, wear down and defeat an enemy. What Svechin in fact saw in 1916 was the fateful failure to seize an opportunity for strategic success by a bold stroke aimed at operational or even strategic annihilation: bold exploitation of the breakthrough at Lutsk to push further, to Kovel or L'viv, cutting off retreating Austrian forces and perhaps driving Austria from the war altogether. Svechin said “the offensive was stopped not by the enemy, but . . . by the orders of the Commander of the South-Western Front.” This was going too far, since there was blame to be shared by *Stavka* and by Kaledin, not just Brusilov. But Svechin's assessment of what had been lost still stands, and it was precisely the chance for annihilation of the enemy: “Before us we had space to maneuver, and instead we looked for defense and sought a quick return to positional warfare.”⁶⁸ Svechin's insistence on the power of circumstance—that no approach to warfare could be endorsed without clear understanding of the particular time and place that made it appropriate, was eminently clear in 1920. Brusilov's failure, in Svechin's mind, was exactly what Svechin has too often been dismissed as doing: settling for attrition and rejecting destruction.

66. Compare Cherkasov, 13, with Alekseev to Brusilov, 27 May/9 June 1916, in *Nastuplenie*, doc. 188, 252.

67. Brusilov in Cherkasov, *Lutskii proryv*, 20–25.

68. *Ibid.*, 17–18.

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