Book Review

Zoltan Barany,
"Democratic Breakdown and the Russian Army. Military Politics and Institutional Decay"

There is a lot to be learned about the (re)organizations of the Russian military, about the military's relationship with civil authorities, and about the military's (continuing) role in framing the nation's idea of who is friend and who is foe, from Zoltan Barany's latest book—even by those who are relatively well informed about the terrain he covers.

Barany is an expert on a number of quite distinct subjects, on 'politics and the Russian armed forces', but also on The East European Gypsies, the title of his 2002 book published by Cambridge University Press (subtitled Regime Change, Marginality, and Ethnopolitics)—perhaps his most original book. In that book, Barany writes about Gypsies in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Macedonia, but not, alas, in Ukraine or Russia. There is still no comparable study dealing with Gypsies in Russia and Ukraine.

The title of Barany's latest contribution to the area of Russian studies is "Democratic Breakdown and the Russian Army", which bears as its subtitle Military Politics and Institutional Decay. For some reason, the full title on the dust jacket reads "Democratic Breakdown and the Decline of the Russian Military". In the Introduction, Barany presents his theoretical framework, makes reference to the various strands of institutionalism and goes into the concept of 'institutional decay'.

The Introduction also offers a roadmap to the book. There is a whole chapter on decay, Chapter 2: “Assessing Decay: The Soviet/Russian Military, 1985-2006” (pp. 44-77). But the first chapter is on "The Tragedy and Symbolism of the Kursk" (pp. 19-43). Whereas the second chapter gives us a 'historical overview' of the Soviet/Russian military's malfunctioning in the last twenty years or so, the first chapter gives us an illustration of, and an insight into, the military—especially the navy's malfunctioning, as well as of the political-military or civil-military ‘interface’, in a detailed study of the sinking of the nuclear submarine Kursk in August 2000 and its aftermath. Chapter 3 is on “Explaining the Military's Political Presence”
It describes and tries to explain the prominent role of military officers in other than military functions, especially as parliamentarians—i.e., as members of legislative bodies, in the RSFSR/R.F. General Aleksandr Lebed’s civil career is treated in this chapter too, as are Aleksandr Rutskoi’s, Igor Radionov’s and Lev Rochlin’s political careers.

I was a bit surprised not to find any mention of Viktor Alksnis here, the ‘black colonel’, who, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, was among the more outspoken, even vociferous, critics of Union reform. In 1990, as a member of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, he was co-founder of the Союз (Union) fraction. Later on, he was a member of Rodina (Motherland) in the State Duma. Rodina split, its major part fusing with the Partiia pensionerov and Partiia zhitnii into Spravedlivaya Rossia. Perhaps there is a reason for Barany not including Alksnis here, as Barany focuses on (former) high-ranking officers openly opposing state policy, and Alksnis stopped being an ‘oppositionist’ quite some time ago. Or was Alksnis not high-ranking enough to be included? Barany goes as far as to say that “[t]he military elites’ active obstruction of policy is a quintessential part of contemporary Russian civil-military relations”, and goes on to say that “[t]hey have been most successful in blocking the implementation of a substantive defense reform, the policy that most directly affects the lives and career prospects of officers”. 1 I tend to think that, as far as the content of the first quote is concerned, this statement no longer holds, and the top brass’ (open) obstruction of ‘leading politicians’ no longer obtains. The conflict between the Chief of Staff and the Minister of Defense has been decided, I think, in favor of the Minister of Defense, who, presently, is a civilian. Anatoly Serdiukov headed the Federal Tax Service before he was appointed Minister of Defense in 2007. In his controversy with the Chief of Staff—and it was not the first time that the Chief of Staff fell out with the Minister of Defense—Serdiukov evidently received (then) President Vladimir Putin’s backing. Or perhaps we should conclude that the civil-military controversy (as Barany sees it) has ended with the military’s position on many or most points now finding civil authorities’ support (conscription is being maintained, albeit with a reduced period of service; we have seen rises and additional rises in the Defense budget; a renewed emphasis on weapons development; and, more recently, the announcement that state policy will be to bring the nuclear-weapons systems up to date). It may be argued that what we have witnessed recently—but what has been in the making for quite some time—is a coming together of the civil and military state sectors under a new nationalistic civil-military banner of a

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