



On war and perception of war in Russian thinking

LtCol(GS), PhD Petteri Lahu

The Nature of armed conflict has been in constant change after the turn of the millenium. We experienced a short period of euphoric thoughts which promised and convinced us to think that possibility of armed conflict in European heartland was close to zero. I think that we were wrong.

Preface

After the turn of the millennium our idea of the nature, reasons and justifications of military conflicts has been in constant change. My generation was educated during the last years of the Cold War, and our perception of war was defined by the struggle between states and ideologies, and battles were considered as symmetric confrontations between heavily armed mechanized all-arms-formations supported by air force. We witnessed a transformation from national defence – which after a brief euphoric period – turned into a global asymmetric war against terrorism, and then into crisis management operations far away from our own territory. The Russo-Georgian war, and finally the Ukrainian conflict, however, have forced us along with the politicians to understand that war, being a form of violent human behaviour, is in its essence a prevailing (re-occurring) phenomenon, and we cannot rule out the possibility of war on our own continent.

In this article I will discuss the Russian perception of war according to military-political definitions, proclamations and observations based on actuality. Information and conclusions presented here are based on my own research, and they do not represent the official views of the Finnish Defence Forces.

In addition to Russian definitions, I will use observations made by the american philosopher Anatol Rapoport (1911–2007). According to him, there are three main social streams on how war is perceived: *instrumental*, where war is understood as a tool and a continuation of politics in order to obtain reasonable objectives. According to *cataclysmic* school of thought war is unable to provide any kind of lasting political solution, even though some momentary victories may take place. The *eschatological* school of thought sees war as a tool for implementing the unavoidable historical process and to achieve something totally new. In the modern western, and particularly in European view, war, especially when it touches one’s own national state, is seen typically as cataclysmic. This attitude is reflected even in our taboos, we avoid using the word *war*, just like our ancestors avoided calling predators with their proper names.

The concept of war in Russian thinking

According to the Russian definition war is a social and political phenomenon relating to radical changes in the relationships between states and peoples. War entails a transfer towards armed and other violent methods in order to achieve desired objectives. The current Russian definition of war is Clausewitzian, however, it has a Marxist-Leninist *amendment*: war, by nature, is the continuation of state’s or its *ruling elite’s* policy by violent means.

Military conflict i.e. war. Military conflict is a form of resolving inter-state or intra-state contradictions with the use of military force.			
Armed conflict. Armed clash between states or between opposing sides in the territory of one state.	Local war. Local war is a war between two or more states with <i>limited objectives</i> . Military actions take place within the borders of the warring states.	Regional war. War involving two or more states. Limited objectives. States’ or coalition forces with conventional or nuclear weapons in the region, at adjacent seas and in air and space. <i>Important military-political objectives.</i>	Large-scale war. War between coalitions of states, or major states of the world community in which the sides are pursuing <i>radical military-political objectives</i> . May result from an escalation of a lower level conflict or war. Requires mobilization of all resources.

Table 1. Russian classification of military conflicts (wars).



According to the Russian definition, war i.e. military conflict, is divided into armed conflict, local, regional and large-scale war, as depicted in table 1. This classification is based on the scale and objectives, and it refers also to methods and resources used in different variations of conflicts.

In Russia, war is regarded as the utmost form of confrontation. In addition to utilization of armed forces, war covers also methods and forms of non-military struggle. The form and methods of the struggle depend on the stage of development of the warring parties, on their economy, capabilities of their defence industries, combat-readiness of their armed forces, the number of reserves to be mobilized, and the moral strength of the societies. War is tightly bound to politics and economy. Policy defines the objective and nature of the war and has a decisive impact on its intensity and means to wage it.

According to the definition, the principal and decisive form of struggle is the armed one, which includes the systematic use of armed forces and other armed formations in all physical dimensions. The scale, chosen equipment, methods and areas of operation of the struggle may be limited due to circumstances and legal aspects. Armed struggle consists of offensive, defensive, supportive and other activities of the troops or forces, changes in their deployment and manoeuvre.

Reasons for wars

In the Russian theory reasons for wars are divided into two main categories: objective and subjective. In general, objective reasons are geo-political and economic interests, which cause unresolved conflicts and hostilities between states. Also, overpopulation and lack of necessary natural resources belong to objective reasons. In these kinds of situations the aggression needed to provoke hostilities is created by elite's slogans for defending the nation, re-claiming historical justice, or obtaining additional territory for living. Among subjective reasons are, for example, aspirations and ambitions of the political leaders and calculations on possible advantages gained by the war. An imminent cause for war can also be a misjudgement of adversary's intentions and actions, where these are interpreted as concealed preparations for war.

Concept of legitimate war in Russian perspective

According to the Russian point of view, protection of nations' independence and freedom are legitimate reasons for war. Legitimate war is the opposite of non-legitimate war by its nature. A legitimate war can, however, turn into a non-legitimate war when conditions and policies change. The definition states wisely that each warring party tries to achieve a position as a legitimate combatant through means of diplomacy and information warfare.

Russia has declared in its *military doctrine* that it will take military measures for the protection of its national interests and the interests of its allies only after political, diplomatic, legal, economic, informational and other non-violent instruments have been exhausted. According to the doctrine, Russia has the legitimate right to employ its armed forces to repel aggression against itself and/or its allies, to maintain (restore) peace as decided by the UN Security Council or another collective security body, as well as to protect its citizens abroad in accordance with generally recognized principles and norms of international law and international treaties of the Russian Federation. The Russian *federal law on defence* permits the operational deployment of armed forces *beyond the territorial boundaries* of Russia in order to repel an armed attack on Russian armed forces or other troops or organs, to repel or prevent an armed attack on another state which makes a corresponding request to Russia, to protect Russian citizens

from armed attack, and to combat piracy and ensure the security of shipping.

Military-political containment

The concept of *containment* is closely linked to the Russian military-political thinking. The concept of containment can be defined as a combination of military and political measures which attempt to prevent direct attacks towards peaceful development and threats to important interests. The basis for these measures is to create a threat of directing military force in such a manner that it forces the potential adversary to avoid its attack, because the post-attack countermeasures would exhaust the adversary's potential or motive to continue its war.

The main tool for creating a military-political containment is the state's military organization, and especially armed forces. Since their introduction, nuclear weapons have been used to create and demonstrate an actual possibility to launch a counter-strike able to inflict unbearable losses to the adversary. According to the Russian military doctrine nuclear weapons create containment against aggression; they guarantee the safety of Russia and its allies and support international stability and peace. In addition to the nuclear containment, the latest version of the doctrine has also raised an idea of containment created by conventional weapons.

In addition to their aggression-preventive nature, Russia also regards nuclear weapons as a feasible form of armed combat. According to the doctrine Russia reserves the right to use nuclear weapons in response to the use of nuclear and other types of weapons of mass destruction against it and/or its allies, as well as in the event of aggression against the Russian Federation with the use of conventional weapons when the very existence of the state is in jeopardy.

Historical changes in attitudes towards war

During Gorbachev's perestroika in the 1980's, the Soviet security thinking abandoned the Marxist-Leninist period's Clausewitzian concept of war as an acceptable and feasible method for continuing politics by other means in inter-state matters. Furthermore, Russia's first military doctrine in 1993 conveyed a message that the confrontation that had lasted for decades was basically over in the new situation.

During that era the West also estimated that the idea of war had changed: the concept of limiting military operations to out-of-own-territory and even out-of-own-continent crisis management operations and to war against terrorism became dominant. According to the new paradigm victory would be gained through superior technology and few casualties. Quantity would be replaced only by quality, and therefore conscription-based armed forces were soon abandoned both in West Europe and in the new Nato member states in East Europe. A military conflict in one's own territory was deemed to be very unlikely. It was assumed that the development in Russia would go to the same direction.

In Russia, however, despite of its unlikelihood, war between states was not ruled out of possible scenarios or preparation plans, even though the country's slide into a decade-long insurgency war in Chechnya forced the armed forces to operate in a lower-level conflict instead of the previously anticipated super power clash. War and its threat were present at Russians day-to-day life. Chechnya was pacified with military force, and therefore war and the armed forces in it were seen, using the instrumental interpretation, as a feasible and useful tool to maintain security.



In Russian view, Russia defended its own peace-keepers, Abkhazians, and Ossetians from Georgian attack in the 5-day Russo-Georgian war. Despite the deficiencies in leadership and materiel, the Russian readiness and capabilities were on a surprisingly good level.

During the Ukrainian crisis Russia used armed forces to secure its national and military interests without a traditional, detectable progress of escalation. Russia was able to utilize the chaotic situation in its neighbouring state by seizing a piece of Ukrainian territory and gained control over it. After this, a referendum was organized in the Crimean peninsula, now illegally occupied by Russia. Justification for these actions was grounded on peoples' right to self-determination. At the same time, a substantial number of Russian troops were deployed to the border facing Ukraine to tie down Ukrainian forces, thus disabling them to project force to Crimea. Since the Crimean operation Russia has been involved in the prolonged military operations in East Ukraine.

In the autumn of 2015 Russia started air operations in the Syrian civil war to support the Syrian government and to fight Daesh. This is probably Russia's first military action where it projects force and uses it in combat outside its own or its coalition's immediate territory since Suvorov's 1799 campaign at the Alps.

Russian perception of conflict and armed battle today

In the winter of 2013 Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia, General of the Army Valery Gerasimov described the transformation in inter-state conflicts and warfare methods. According to him, "rules of war" have changed significantly due to the events of the Arab spring. In conflict resolutions, the ratio between non-military and military activities is 4:1.

In addition to conventional ones, irregular methods are being used in military operations more than before. There is a trend towards joint (mobile task forces which utilize common intelligence and information space, opportunities offered by new com-

munication-and-control, and supporting equipment. Military operations will become more dynamic and active and they will be more effective. There will be no operative and tactical pauses between operations' active phases for the adversary to take advantage of. New information technology will bring the leadership and troops closer to each other in dimensions of space, time, and information. Confrontations of large formations in frontline battles are history, and avoidance of contact with the adversary will be the most important method for achieving goals in operations and battles. Targets will be destroyed throughout the whole depth of adversary's area. The differences between strategic, operative and tactical level will become blurred, as well as the difference between offensive and defensive actions. Precision-guided weapons will be used widely. Weapons based on new physical principles and autonomous actions will be commissioned to active duty.

Asymmetric operations are used widely. These are used to balance adversary's superiority in armed battle. These methods include special operations, use of internal opposition throughout the adversary's area as a permanent front and influencing with information. Figure 1 depicts the changes in methods and forms of warfare.

Changes described by Gerasimov are reflecting the theoretical understanding of battle doctrine shared by the leading states and therefore *they cannot be understood as a unique vision of Russian war fighting methods*. Figures presented in articles describing Gerasimov's speech (Figure 2) have been interpreted, for example, as an escalation model for Russia's actions.

This interpretation gives a false impression that the eruption and development of conflicts will follow clear and detectable phases. For example, military actions were utilized in the very beginning of the Crimean operation, and non-military pressure was added later on.

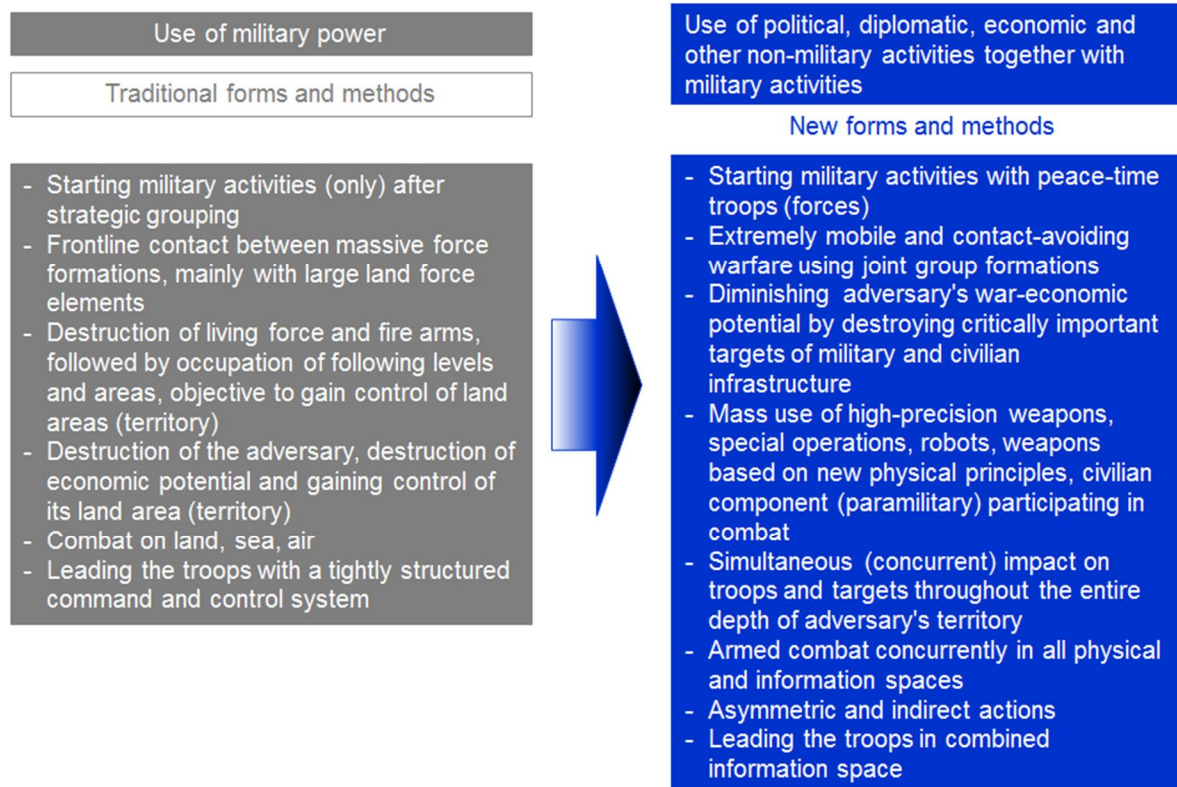


Figure 1. Evolution of forms and methods in armed conflicts (Gerasimov).

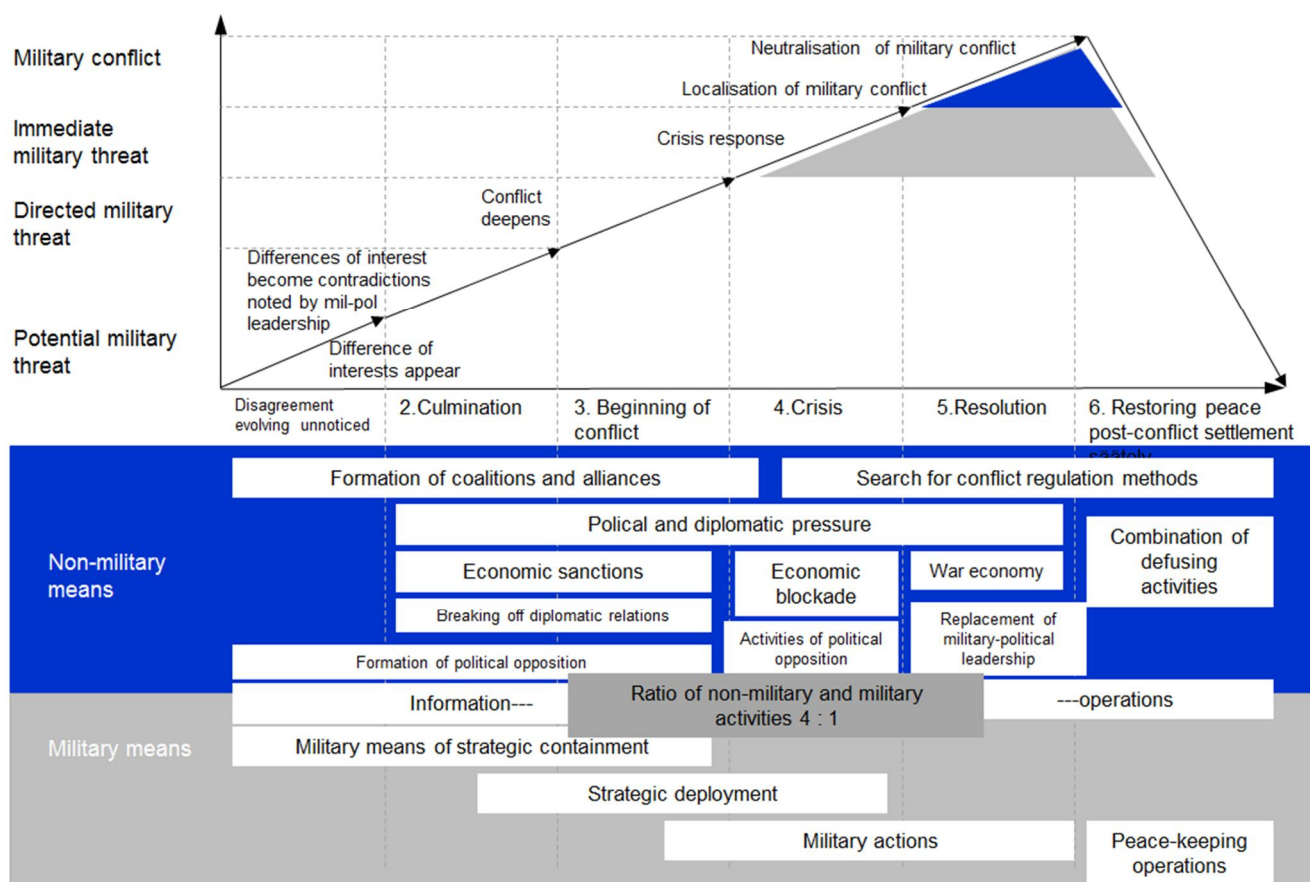


Figure 2. Use of non-military and military methods in escalation of international conflicts (Gerasimov).

It is worth noticing in Gerasimov’s conflict resolution model that it is possible to start military actions even before the strategic deployment has been completed. Furthermore, information operations which can be non-military or military, are proceeding throughout the conflict, i.e. continuously. In this sense, discussions on whether the term information war or warfare can be used before a clearly verified armed attack or an imminent threat of such an attack takes place, do sometimes sound unpractical.

An observant reader should also notice that the presentation of the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces deals with resolution methods of inter-state conflicts, which are not necessarily conflicts escalated to a military conflict (war). An interesting detail in Gerasimov’s presentation, and in 2014 military doctrine’s passages on use of armed forces, is the word-for-word quotation of most central definition on deep battle *influencing the enemy simultaneously throughout the whole depth of its territory* presented by marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky (1893–1937).

According to Russian military-political thinking wars are waged by the military organization of the state, which is a complex of state administration and military command and control bodies, the armed forces, other troops, military units and bodies as well as the country’s defence-industrial complex. Russia’s armed forces can be roughly divided into four main elements. *Strategic containment* is formed by strategic nuclear weapons which are in permanent readiness, operated by Strategic Rocket Forces, Long Range Aviation, and ballistic missile submarines. Strategic containment is enhanced by tactical nuclear weapons and conventional missiles capable of long-distance and precision strikes. Territorial integrity of Russian air space is guarded and secured

by Aerospace Defence Forces’ surveillance and defence systems. In addition to this, another task for the surveillance systems is to detect strategic missile launches. In Russia, *Aerospace Defence Forces’ anti-aircraft missile systems* are in constant combat watch to repel aggressions coming from air or space. Therefore, the use of missile systems differs from the western practice of using defensive fighter operations to defend territorial integrity. *The Special Operations and the Airborne Troops* form the rapidly deployable spearhead under supreme commander’s power which can be used flexibly in the early phases of armed conflicts. In addition to these troops, the Ministry of Internal Affairs has its own special forces. The main body of Russia’s conventional force is formed by the *permanent readiness units* of the Army, Navy, and Air Force.

Currently, the main body of personnel supply in the armed forces is based on conscripts. Units/formations are, especially in the army, training organisations which cannot be used immediately in combat operations. During the Ukrainian crisis, battle groups of 1–2 battalion could be directed to the area of operation from the permanent readiness brigades, and therefore, to form a sufficient formation, it was necessary to move troops from all of the Russian Military Districts.

There is a large potential of trained military personnel in Russia, formed by conscripts (reservists) and professional soldiers who have ended their tour of duty. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, Russia has not put any major effort into preparation of mobilization, or refresher training of its armed forces’ reservists. It is unlikely that the situation will change any time soon, despite the 2015 order by president Putin to form a reserve



for the armed forces. According to Gerasimov's model, the ratio between non-military and military means in conflict resolution is 4:1. Instead of theoretical calculations on mobilization capabilities, in my opinion, it would be more worthwhile to analyse how Russia, now transforming towards a more and more centralised decision making, is able to reach its aims when it is using a combination of non-military and military means. In this respect, a mere speculation on quantities of main battle tanks and ranges of missiles is not giving us the best possible result.

Hybrid warfare in Russian thinking

With the exceptions of some isolated articles discussing the principles of hybrid warfare and how the Russian armed forces adapted them during the Crimean occupation operation, the Russian military scientific thinking normally refers to hybrid warfare as a western phenomenon. The term is not seen as an accepted concept in Russian military science. Russian military scientist, however, have deemed it necessary to research how the Russian armed forces are participating in securing national interests with other authorities in complex efforts. Hybrid warfare is regarded as a western phenomenon, aiming to occupy a foreign state or parts of it with an operation based on political, diplomatic, informational propagandistic, financial, economic, and military means.

In Russia, the most extravagant descriptions of hybrid warfare do portrait it as an operational method threatening Russia. Even though the definition of the concept describes western actions and intentions, it makes one wonder, whether it does to some extent reflect Russia's own actions, for example, during the Crimean occupation operation. The described methods of hybrid warfare do indeed have a remarkable resemblance to what actually happened in 2014.

Conclusions

The heritage of dialectic philosophy is still a part of the Russian view on wars and military security. The Clausewitzian definition of war has been refocused by Marx and especially Engels and Lenin, and it is still ruling. Dialectic philosophy argues that the struggle between two opposing forces goes on eternally as a zero-sum game, and each concession just increases your own risk. International developments, especially the US military politics and use of armed forces are being followed intensively, and their trends are being reflected in Russian attitudes towards war and practical military operations and the development of armed forces. Definitions for concepts which describe reasons for wars and their justifications provide an interesting starting point for analysing military politics in president Putin's Russia. In Georgian and Ukrainian crises and in Syrian air operations Russia has demonstrated its high readiness for limited military operations for securing and promoting its national interests in situations when, according to its estimation, success is easily gained and risk of unfavourable escalation is low. Russia has succeeded in justifying its use of force better than before by using information operations. The main method of these operations has been breaking the unity of the target audience with more or less elevated justifications, similar to those used by USA and its coalitions in the past. We can argue that Russia's perception of war has changed toward the extreme end of the scale cataclysmic-instrumental and war is regarded as an ordinary and successive method for achieving own goals.

Epilogue

From the informational dimension's point of view Russia has fully exploited the success in the Syrian operation. President Vladimir Putin has demonstrated great determination by giving the orders for partial withdrawal on 14 March 2016, claiming that the operation is accomplished. After the recapture, or liberation, as cited in Russian media, of ancient Palmyra in mid-March by a joint operation of Russian and Syrian forces, Russia has also got a hint of appreciation from the west: a Roman arch that was destroyed by Daesh fighters in Palmyra was recreated and put on display in Trafalgar Square, London, for three days in mid-April. Could we assume that the west, with growing impatience caused by its own prolonged operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, was eager to praise the success of the Russian way of waging the instrumental war with the common enemy by erecting a triumphal arch? This was surely a free lunch for the Russian agitprop machine.

Author

LtCol (GS), PhD (Military Science) is the Head of Concepts & Doctrine Division of Finnish Defence Research Agency (FDRA). email: petteri.lalu(at)mil.fi.

Translation from a Finnish original – MA Antti Hujala, Finnish Defence Research Agency, Doctrine and Concepts Division.

Sources

Война и мир в терминах и определениях (War and Peace in Terms and Definitions), edited by Dmitry Rogozin deputy prime minister of Russian Federation

Military doctrines of Russia (1993, 2000, 2010, 2014)

Russian law on defence: Федеральный закон от 31 мая 1996 г. N 61-ФЗ "Об обороне" (с изменениями и дополнениями)

Russian military encyclopaediae:

Советская военная энциклопедия, в восьми томах, Военное издательство министерства обороны СССР, Москва, 1976–1980.

Военный энциклопедический словарь, Военное издательство, Москва, 1986.

Военный энциклопедический словарь, Военное издательство, Москва, 2007.

Герасимов, Валерий: Новые вызовы требуют переосмысления форм и способов ведения боевых действий, Военно-промышленный курьер, 5.3.2013 http://vpk-news.ru/sites/default/files/pdf/VPK_08_476.pdf, 30.1.2015.

Kofman, Michael: Russian Hybrid Warfare and Other Dark Arts, <http://warontherocks.com/2016/03/russian-hybrid-warfare-and-other-dark-arts/>, 21.3.2016.

Lalu, Petteri: Syvää ja pelkästään tiheää?: Neuvostoliittolaisen ja venäläisen sotataidollisen ajattelun lähtökohdat, kehittyminen, soveltaminen käytäntöön ja nykytilanne. Näkökulmana 1920- ja 1930-luvun syvän taistelun ja operaation opit (diss.), Maanpuolustuskorkeakoulu, Tampere, 2014.

*Sipilä, Joonas: Sota tutkimuksen kohteena, in *Suomalaisia näkökulmia strategian tutkimukseen*, ed. Sivonen Pekka, Maanpuolustuskorkeakoulu, Tampere, 2013, ss. 59–90.*