

RUSSIAN MILITARY DIVERSION – MASKIROVKA, USED IN THE BLACK SEA AREA

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Abstract: *Taking into consideration the influence this doctrine has, being used in the maritime environment, over the Black Sea riparian countries, we consider that the analysis of its effects is an element of novelty and interest. The research methods used are observation, analysis and description. At the end of this article, we attempted to identify a pattern of the methods used to implement this doctrine in the Black Sea region. To this purpose, in order to identify the doctrine’s general framework, we will take into consideration threats and risks, indications and warnings. Through this approach, we wish to address specialists, researchers and students who want to analyze these issues and develop courses of action, in order to give an optimum response, in the conditions of a maritime or riverine threat.*

Keywords: *deception; diversion; interference; strategy; Black Sea; Maskirovka.*

Introduction

The Crimean Peninsula annexation in 2014, by Russia, caught the international community by surprise. The Russian Army disguised its actions and denied them - but those "little green people" who appeared in the Black Sea peninsula, were a classic case of the Russian practice of military deception or Maskirovka, a word that translates as "something masked".

From the Chinese military strategist, Sun Tzu, to the great contemporary military commanders, war is described as an eternal way of cunning, with the whole human history being portrayed as a history of deception. But Russia, over the centuries, has mastered these techniques.

The deception strategies were used in countless conflicts, including the Stalingrad battle (1942-1943), when the Soviets gave the impression that the Red Army had few reserves and could not cope with a large-scale German counteroffensive, operation Iasi-Chisinau (1944, Romania-Moldova) in which dozens of tank models were used, as well as entire divisions of the Red Army were sent in false directions to mislead the Germans, Bagration operation (1944, Belarus) when the Russian generals decided not to use the roads, but take the marshlands, to attack German forces from behind.

The key elements in Maskirovka are surprise and denial. Maskirovka is used to catch opponents on the wrong foot and to make them act only on unconfirmed assumptions.

What is Maskirovka?

According to the Oxford dictionary¹, maskirovka is a noun designating political or military scams, especially directed against Western intelligence services, used in Russia and other countries of the former Soviet Union.

Maskirovka or Russian military diversion is a doctrine developed at the beginning of the 20th century. The doctrine covers a wide range of measures for military deception, including camouflage, denial, diversion, concealment, imitation with baits/mock-ups and dummies, maneuvers intended to deceive and misinformation.

¹ Link: <https://www.lexico.com/definition/maskirovka>, viewed on 02/23/2021.

In the operation and tactics field manual of the USSR's Ground Forces², the word “deceive” occurs several times, describing procedures for misleading the enemy through:

- attacks from unexpected directions, using land and weather to their own advantage;
- security areas or *essalons*, which represents battlefields in front of the main defense area, occupied by a force whose mission is to delay and mislead the enemy regarding the location and deployment of the main defense force. They employ the enemy at the greatest possible distance and try to make it act prematurely;
- using false firing positions to deceive the enemy about the actual location of defense systems;
- covert forces that would mislead the enemy about the withdrawal of the main troops;
- smoke is used to deceive the enemy by hiding the size and direction of an attack;
- anti-air defense systems repositioning, between attacks, to deceive the enemy about the power and formation of air defense units;
- use of mobile air defense units to trick the enemy about the location of other air defense elements;
- the use of buffer zones in which false systems are installed to deceive the enemy (smoke devices, fire, systems that imitate the sound of military equipment or machinery) pertaining the actual location of the forces and the likely direction of attack.

Apart from the use of doctrine in classical military conflicts, it has been also implemented on time of peace, with denial and deception operations, in events such as:

- the Cuban missile crisis (1962), which was a confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States in connection with the deployment of Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba. The game played by the USSR President Nikita Hruschov in this crisis, was intimidating, but very risky, because the USSR was at strategic disadvantage, surrounded by American nuclear weapons bases;
- the invasion of Czechoslovakia (1968), when the leaders of Czechoslovakia said they had no knowledge of the Russian invasion, the respective night. However, the Soviet central newspapers published an unsigned letter, which was allegedly sent by Czechoslovakia to request "immediate assistance, including the army";
- annexation of Crimea (2014), in the Russian opinion, took place after local authorities declared their independence from Ukraine and held a popular referendum. However, this referendum, carried out under Russian military occupation, was not recognized and considered illegal by the government in Kiev and the international community. Vladimir Putin finally admitted that during the Crimean referendum, the Russian Army was present throughout the peninsula, after previously declaring the armed troops as local self-defense forces.

Use of Maskirovka in the Black Sea extended area

Attack on Georgia (2008)

In the case of Georgia, Russia prepared the conflict by techniques of Maskirovka, but used conventional military forces in the assault phase. According to the events, there is no doubt about who the aggressor is, in the Russian-Georgian war: Russia was ready to intervene in Georgia, using separatists in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, well before 2008³.

At the time, Georgia was in full negotiations for NATO membership, but it could not benefit from the collective defense of the Alliance. Russia saw an opportunity to oppose the European and Euro-Atlantic path of Georgians and at the same time to demonstrate its military power in the

² The Soviet Army Operations and Tactics (FM 100-2-1), USA HQ Department of the Army, Washington D.C., 07/16/1984, link: <https://fas.org/irp/doddir/army/fm100-2-1.pdf>, viewed on 02/23/2021.

³ Marcel van Herpen, *Putin's Wars: the Rise of Russia's New Imperialism*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2014.

region. Their tactics was based on the fact that Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili would immediately react, convinced he would receive immediate US and NATO support.

On 8 August 2008, after months of allegations and challenges between the two sides, and a series of clashes between the militia in South Ossetia and the Georgian military troops, Sakaashvili ordered his troops to capture Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia. Russia responded quickly by moving its troops to the border and conducting air attacks on Georgian positions in South Ossetia as well as in Abkhazia.⁴

Russia's response was quick, and the operation to take over control of South Ossetia and invasion of Georgia were extremely easy, upholding that the operation was not an improvised response to Georgian actions, but the execution of a plan the Russians had been working on for a long time.

Russian tactics also included the use of cyber attacks on Georgia, in a bid to cut off both the military command and communications system and electricity throughout the country.

In the EU Mission report⁵ on the conflict, it is claimed that the Georgian people did not deny the initiation of hostilities, but they reacted to the illegal presence of Russian forces, that were not part of the peace-keeping contingent deployed in the area. The Russian military also carried out repairs to the railway lines between South Ossetia and Sochi (Russia), in order to be able to transport troops by rail from Russia. Also, the issuing of Russian passports to the citizens of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, was interpreted by the Georgian leadership, as an act of "slow annexation" and provocation.

In the international opinion, Georgia acted imprudently, wrongly anticipating NATO's support to reintegrate a separatist region. Based on evidence of careful planning of Russian forces, Georgia was most likely the victim of a reflexive control. The Western press was also manipulated, considering that Russian misinformation was the basis for international opinion as events took place.

Moscow's aggressive response to its long-standing tensions with Georgia, announced Russia's reinvigoration as a military power, and paved the way for its controversial relations with another former Soviet republic, Ukraine, since 2014.

Crimean annexation (2014)

As of late February 2014, in the Crimean Peninsula, troops were observed, in unmarked military trucks, with modern armaments and kaki uniforms, without distinctive markings, which were named "little green men". It is known now that they were part of the Russian special forces, but at that time, nobody could confirm that. At the press conference, held a few days later by president Vladimir Putin, he was asked about the resemblance of the soldiers military uniforms who blocked Ukrainian military units from the territory of Crimea, with Russian uniforms, and he said: "Why don't you take a look at the post-Soviet states? There are many uniforms there that are similar. You can go to a store and buy any kind of uniform."⁶ Five weeks later, after the annexation was validated by the Moscow Parliament, Putin admitted that the troops deployed in Crimea were Russian⁷. But the lie served its purpose.

In addition, in the framework of the Russian aggressive disinformation campaign in the spring of 2014, Ukraine was portrayed as posing a deadly threat to Russians and Russian

⁴ Sarah Pruitt, "How a Five-Day War with Georgia Allowed Russia to Reassert Its Military Might", History website, 09/04/2018, link: <https://www.history.com/news/russia-georgia-war-military-nato>, viewed on 02/24/2021.

⁵ "Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia" EU report, September 2009, link: https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/HUDOC_38263_08_Annexes_ENG.pdf, viewed on 02/24/2021.

⁶ President of Russia official website, 03/04/2014, link: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20366>, viewed on 02/22/2021.

⁷ President of Russia official website, 04/17/2014, link: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20796>, viewed on 02/23/2021.

speakers. President Putin's speech, congratulating Crimea on becoming a part of Russian Federation⁸, he said the Euromaidan revolutionaries “resorted to terror, murder and revolts. Nationalists, neonazists, rusophobs and anti-Semitic have carried out this coup.” This statement is exactly the opposite of the conclusions of the Council of Europe report, following a visit to Ukraine the same month, when they found no change in the status of minority rights, no increase in anti-Semitism or threats to the Russians and the Russian language in western Ukraine. The most difficult situation had been with the tatars of Crimea.⁹

While Russia is exploiting its own national social media platforms, it has also strengthened internet control on its territory, with FSB services focusing on seeking domestic and foreign enemies.¹⁰

However, the hybrid war also requires conditions to be met that are favorable to the application of its operating methods. In Crimea, information attacks found a perfect environment, which was much less prevalent in Eastern Ukraine. Russian policies have increased Putin's internal popularity¹¹, but at the same time, they have seriously damaged his and Russian reputation in the international environment, where few people trust Putin and Russian leaders.

The different results of the Russian hybrid war in Crimea and Donbas show how much local conditions matter. In Crimea, there was an almost complete presence of the local-level Russian security forces, the navy base in Sevastopol, the Russian Black Sea Fleet and a receptive Russian-speaking population, with a history of support for separatism since the 1990s. Moreover, the geography of the peninsula is a closed one, connected to the continental Ukraine only by a thin strip of land, and there is popular domestic support in Russia for annexation. That's how Crimea became a perfect target.¹²

Donbass conflict – eastern Ukraine (2014)

After Crimea, the war in Eastern Ukraine came. Officially there were no Russian troops or “little green people” fighting there - just patriot volunteers who went to the region on holiday.

In August 2014, Russian television showed pictures of water and baby food being loaded in white trucks, hastily repainted, led to the war zone of Ukraine as part of a humanitarian operation.

Maj.Gen. Skip Davis¹³ admitted that he needed some time to discover the “size and extent” of the troops' support actions, which was “permanently denied by the Russians”. He called the first convoy “a wonderful example of Maskirovka” because it created a real mass-media storm. “At all this time, equipment, personnel and troops were passing to Eastern Ukraine at other border crossing points controlled by the Russians.” He sees the convoy as a very intelligent “diversion or distraction”.¹⁴

⁸ President of Russia official website, 03/18/2014, link: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>, viewed on 02/24/2021.

⁹ “Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities” report, European Council, Strasbourg, 04/02/2014, link: <https://rm.coe.int/16800c5d6f>, viewed on 02/24/2021.

¹⁰ Luke Harding, “Spies, sleepers and hitmen: how the Soviet Union’s KGB never went away”, 11/19/2014, link: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/19/spies-spoors-hitmen-kgb-never-went-away-russia-putin>, viewed on 02/24/2021.

¹¹ Margaret Vice, “Russians Remain Confident in Putin’s Global Leadership”, Pew Research Center, 06/20/2017, link: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2017/06/20/russians-remain-confident-in-putins-global-leadership/>, viewed on 02/24/2021.

¹² András Rác, “Russia’s Hybrid War in Ukraine”, The Finnish Institute of International Affairs, link: <https://stratcomcoe.org/andras-racz-russias-hybrid-war-ukraine-breaking-enemys-ability-resist>, viewed on 02/24/2021.

¹³ Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Intelligence, Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, 2013-2015.

¹⁴ Lucy Ash, “How Russia outfoxes its enemies”, BBC news website, 01/29/2015, link: <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-31020283>, viewed on 02/25/2021.

On 12/17/2015, President Putin finally confirmed that Russia had indeed “people in Ukraine who were involved in certain tasks, including the military sphere”.¹⁵ Another example confirming the presence of Russian military troops in Ukraine, was the unintended publication in the Russian budget of informations on the payment of death and disability compensations for Russian soldiers killed or injured in Ukraine. The pro-Russian separatist forces were also supported by a large number of conventional forces, deployed near the border, aimed at threatening escalation, intimidating local forces to cooperate and creating political uncertainty in European and NATO forums.

In economic terms, Putin did not hesitate to threaten energy security by manipulating the supply and price of gas to Ukraine and other European consumers.

As for the disinformation, repeating the same false reports, the Russian press and diplomats managed to send their message to the media of the nations concerned, then overwhelming the coverage of local media institutions. Manufactured stories, such as Poland's expectations to take advantage of internal unrest, to settle territorial claims on Ukraine, that Islamist fighters participated on the side of Ukrainian nationalists, and that the overthrow of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich was a coup d'état by the CIA or the West, flooded the press, creating alternative explanations for the evolution of events.¹⁶

The Russian military aggression in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea did permanently break the links considered by many in Eastern Ukraine, between the Russian and Ukrainian “brothers”, making Ukraine's peaceful integration with Russia less likely than ever.

Conclusions

Research has identified that Maskirovka has undergone changes since its use in the second World War, especially in the increasing importance of misinformation in Russian military operations, in order to create uncertainty.

At this point, the purely military application of deception is on a low trend, while there is a development of a governmental approach. The reason for the transformation is that Maskirovka no longer represents just the creation of a battlefield surprise, but the modification of general behavior, the creation of ambiguities and uncertainty to facilitate Russia's freedom of action in the areas of interest.¹⁷

The application of Maskirovka in Crimea and Ukraine underlines the pragmatic adaptation of the doctrine on practical scenarios.

Initially, Maskirovka was aimed at protecting the interests of the Soviet Union in the battlefield and ensuring military success. Maskirovka, used in recent conflicts, shows that it has turned into a concept that allows Russia to re-establish (by force, when necessary) its sphere of influence outside its own borders. So far, Putin has focused on Georgia, Ukraine, and even on Moldova, buffer nations between the West and Moscow, each of which has aspirations to join Western structures, including the European Union and NATO.

These countries are being assaulted with disinformation campaigns, fake news and active deception measures before they become fashionable phrases. By paying attention to what Russia does to its neighbors, we can foreshadow things Moscow can try later, further to the west.

By controlling the press institutions, both the internal ones and the branches working abroad, Putin can build a completely false message, which he can deliver by repeating and

¹⁵ President of Russia official website, 12/17/2015, link: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50971>, viewed on 02/ 25/2021.

¹⁶ Christopher Paul, Miriam Matthews, “The Russian «Firehose of Falsehood» Propaganda Model”, Rand Corporation, 2016, link: <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html>, viewed on 02/ 25/2021.

¹⁷ Morgan Maier, “A Little Masquerade: Russia’s Evolving Employment of Maskirovka”, United States Army, School of Advanced Military Studies United States Army Command and General Staff College Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 2016, link: <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1022096.pdf>, viewed on 02/ 25/2021.

denying. The international environment needs a substantial effort and expertise to cope with this informational war. To counteract this, it is necessary to use all media platforms, as well as traditional tools such as radio, television and print media, so that all main audiences are reached. Experimental research in psychology suggests that the features of the contemporary Russian propaganda model have the potential to be highly effective. According to previous analyzes, “unlike the war in the open, the invocation of the community will seem to be the the handiest theory, that puts under a protection umbrella for the main military actor deployed in the Ukrainian area, in front of the international community”.¹⁸

Our response (or lack thereof) to the Russian aggression will have a major impact on the other priorities of national security. If we fail to face actions of this kind, there is a better chance than ever, for Russia, to change the values of freedom in Eastern Europe, through coercion, intimidation, deception and the disguised use of force.

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¹⁸ Lucian Valeriu Scipanov, Florin Nistor, “Considerații privind acțiunile militare desfășurate în nordul Mării Negre”, „Carol I” National Defense University Bulletin, Bucharest, Romania, 07/06/2015, link: <https://revista.unap.ro/index.php/revista/article/view/153/132>, viewed on 02/ 25/2021.