

## BOOK REVIEWS

Cockburn, Andrew. *The Threat: Inside the Soviet Military Machine*. New York: Random House, 1983.

This book is an addition to the growing library which attempts to pass beyond the conventional quantitative analyses of the Soviet armed forces to a consideration of how good they really are. The emigration from the USSR of several thousand of its citizens, many of whom have served in the Soviet armed forces, has made it comparatively easy to talk, in detail and in quantity, to people who have actually been there. *The Threat* is a compendium of various sources indicating the real life behind all those thousands of tanks and millions of men; it is not especially original and is based upon secondary sources. Cockburn is writing in reaction to the unending flow of statements from Washington about how 'we' are falling behind the Soviets in this or that area. These statements are normally based on simple calculations of the quantity of Soviet weapons all of which are assumed to be in perfect working order. Cockburn's book is a counterblast to this sort of thing.

The book has two main thrusts of argument. It attacks the practice of "bean counting" arguing that such a procedure gives an exaggerated picture of Soviet power. "Bean counting" refers to the practice of counting up bits of equipment and using that as one's standard of evaluating the enemy. This overestimation is then used to paint a desperate picture which can justify ever more expensive and complicated weapon systems. Cockburn's principal thesis is that "bean counting" produces an unrealistic picture which is an unreliable foundation for intelligent defence planning. The book then could be summed up as a listing of cases and an explication of the reasons why pure quantitative measurement is false and misleading. Cockburn's aim is to try and see the Soviet armed forces from the inside.

It is clear that stating that the Soviets have 35,000 tanks does not show the whole picture; indeed, it gives a very inaccurate picture if these tanks are poorly designed, or badly made or if morale and skills among the crews are low. And that, maintains Cockburn, is the case. Using the available sources, he erects an argument that the Soviet forces have major problems with the quality of their weapons and the morale of their soldiers. The book begins with the comments of the men in the US OPFOR organization who actually have operated Soviet equipment.<sup>1</sup> They have a very low opinion of the T-62 tank for example—it's too cramped, the engine has a useful life of about 200 hours and so on. Cockburn continues upon this theme using first-hand accounts wherever he can. Soviet equipment is poorly made and primitive. Far from this simplicity being a benefit as is so often claimed, the equipment is so primitive that it does not work very well. The

Soviet conscripts have a miserable time of it and generally (and with good reason) hate each other; language difficulties are such that communication is extraordinarily difficult; the officers are as gross a collection of careerists and boot lickers as could be found anywhere. Indeed they do have 35,000 tanks but, Cockburn argues, few of them work, they are poorly made and designed, their crews are inept and inadequately trained and the officers will be so busy protecting their careers that the equipment will never be committed properly. Much of the same thing holds true elsewhere. The Soviet armed forces provide then somewhat of a false front.

Cockburn also devotes some space to chronicling several foolish chases around the military mulberry tree, illustrating how each side's perception of the other's "beans" affects the reaction. One example will suffice to illustrate the point. The Soviets were much affected by the threat of a proposed American bomber which was to fly very high and very fast and they built an interceptor to deal with the problem (the MiG 25). The Americans, who had meanwhile abandoned the bomber, were so impressed by the (largely imagined) characteristics of the MiG 25 that they felt the need to build a very expensive and complicated aircraft to fight it (the F-15 Eagle). So it goes with each side reacting to its overestimation of the other. This cycle is just one of the ones which Cockburn mentions; he has several examples for each of the Soviet armed forces.

The above is a rather passing summary of a large and well-written book and the reader is invited to read it himself to get the full flavour of the arguments. Nevertheless, in brief, that is what the book is about: the Soviet armed forces are nothing like as powerful as "bean counting" would suggest, and both sides waste too much time and effort responding to fancied threats resulting from their false pictures of each other.

Cockburn is, unfortunately, somewhat of an amateur on the subject and this will irritate the readers who are not. A few examples can be given. He seems to think (largely based on a contemptuous reference by "Viktor Suvorov" to the T-64 tank's gun) that smoothbore guns are another example of military foolishness.<sup>2</sup> Not so, for with the proper fin stabilized ammunition, smoothbore tank guns offer some advantages over rifled guns and, while the Soviets may not have figured out how to make such ammunition, the Germans have. Occasionally there is a facile remark which betrays the author's lack of deep knowledge—for example his sneering reference to General Ismail Ali as an "incompetent but reliable crony" of President Sadat.<sup>3</sup> Again, not so, as Cockburn himself should have realized when he praised the Egyptian plan for the Suez Canal crossing in 1973.<sup>4</sup> Ismail Ali had a great deal to do with planning and execution of that operation. A third example of sloppiness is Cockburn's remark that the pay differential between Soviet officers and men is much greater than that between U.S. officers and men.<sup>5</sup> So it is: the U.S. Army is a volunteer army and must therefore pay its soldiers a decent wage. His point would probably have stood had he taken the time to get

the U.S. Army pay scales when it was a conscript force. These are relatively minor points although they can have a rather jarring effect on the reader.

A more serious criticism is the way in which he seems to have swallowed all the fashionable opinions of U.S. modern weapons — they are too expensive; they are too complicated for mortal flesh to operate; they are unreliable and fail their tests all the time. While there is no doubt that there are plenty of unsuccessful weapons programs (the MBT-70 tank is a good illustration of something that got more and more complicated), on the other hand, nothing works right the first time and testing programs are designed to point up flaws. Consider the following story. A new American aircraft had just been designed but it had some problems. Rather than redesigning the wings, the designers attempted to solve their problem by modification — they pitched up the ends of the wings; the tailplane was not right and they fiddled around with it until they were happy; finally the engines were changed. Obviously, this could be written up to sound like another typical SNAFU with cost overruns, testing failures and so on. Perhaps this was the case, but the aircraft in question was the famous F-4 Phantom which, nearly thirty years later, is still in service and has successfully performed in many more roles than it was ever designed for. So, a little balance is required. While some weapons programs are boondoggles, some systems which had teething problems have proven quite successful.

Cockburn is also unfairly hard on the widespread practice of “bean counting.” First of all, until fairly recently, it was next to impossible for an analyst actually to speak to someone who had personal knowledge of Soviet weapons. Therefore, without any sort of qualitative knowledge available, what else could he do but count weapons and assume that they worked? Secondly, “bean counting” has the merit of being relatively objective. Two analysts can have quite a disagreement on the effects on training of the Soviet conviction that Marxist-Leninist ideology is the only way to motivate troops, but they are much less likely to disagree on the number of conscripts in the system at any given moment. Thirdly, there is an understandable tendency, when much is at stake, to operate on the “worst case” hypothesis. Cockburn may give good cause for suspecting that the Soviet armed forces are “Potemkin” force<sup>6</sup> but what if they are not? Thus “bean counting” cannot be lightly dismissed as foolishness.

Nevertheless, when all is said and done, there is no doubt that “bean counting” often leads to an overstatement of the case.<sup>7</sup> This overstatement can then provide a very convenient justification if one wants to make more money with a new weapons program. Generally speaking, Cockburn is probably right in most that he says. The Soviet armed forces cannot be expected to be much better than anything else that the Soviets do, for, after all, armed forces reflect the society from which they spring, and one must remember that the Soviet armed forces belong to the same society which produces Soviet ag-

riculture. Simple quantitative analysis has been overdone (in part because it is easy) and it is time to start working some qualitative and historical appreciation into the mixture. Cockburn's book is a necessary step in this direction and it is a well-argued summary.

Yet, is Cockburn's picture a complete one? The army that he describes would not have been able to endure three years in Afghanistan. While the Soviets have not accomplished very much there, their army has at least not collapsed into a mess of mutiny and defeat.<sup>8</sup> They are tougher than they look. Despite all the insincerity and blundering in the Soviet armed forces (and they are by no means the only ones in which generals cover up for each other) the Soviets have developed control methods to ensure a certain basic standard of performance. Cockburn quotes "Viktor Suvorov" a good deal. He might also have quoted the passage in *The Liberators* when Suvorov was commanding a reserve company in the invasion of Czechoslovakia. It was a rather sad unit full of overweight, ill-trained men who would rather have been somewhere else; the invasion was very tricky and there was, perhaps, a slight flavour of mutiny in the air. As our hero climbed into his command vehicle he was quite certain that two men in it with him were informers and there might have been a third; in any event someone in the vehicle was keeping an eye open. And he knew that the "organs" had been given authority to carry out summary executions. So off he went. His company did not perhaps do a really first class job, but it got where it was supposed to.<sup>9</sup> The Soviets have developed effective methods of control. Everyone knows what the penalty is for disobedience or failure: soldiers who desert are shot "while trying to escape." Not in the most enlightened tradition of man management, but it has worked in the past, and would probably do so again, so long as the Soviets are not losing.<sup>10</sup> As for the bad equipment, the practice of "echelonning" is in part an answer to that problem. Every Soviet formation, for instance a division, is part of an "echelon"—for purposes of example, the second echelon of any army. The army (which is itself an echelon of its *front*) has a certain task to perform — to destroy the NATO forces in a certain area. The division will be given a sub-task of this task — to exploit the success achieved by the first echelon division — and will echelon its regiments to accomplish this sub-task. Thus, the result is that each tank in the division has perhaps one day's fighting to do at a particular place and time. When it has finished its job, its war is over for some time. If the tank is good for only 200 hours, as long as it lasts to the end of its day in battle, that is long enough.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the Soviets believe they can live with their equipment deficiencies.

With respect to sources, purists among scholars who study the Soviet armed forces might be inclined to remark on the relative paucity of original Soviet sources cited in Cockburn's notes. While this is hardly a fatal scholarly flaw, there is now a wealth of original Soviet material available in translated form and it should serve to caution an author to select his sources wisely. Cockburn seems dismissive of

the thorough and widely respected research of William and Harriet Scott, whom he describes contemptuously as "hawkish," while relying heavily on the controversial work of Richard Gabriel. David Jones' eminent *Soviet Armed Forces Review Annual* does not rate a mention. On the other hand, Cockburn quotes "a U.S. private," etc., a good deal. This might seem to be academic nit-picking; after all, the book is as much about the Western *perceptions* of "the threat" as it is about the Soviet forces themselves. Nevertheless, if an author expects to be taken seriously then he has a responsibility to demonstrate his familiarity with the whole body of scholarship, not just those sources which might support his biases. In a more practical vein, Mr. Cockburn's use of unnumbered footnotes is frustrating. A consolidated bibliography would have been helpful.

Finally, it may be worth considering what this book would have been like had it been written in 1941. First, the batch of emigrants would have shown that the Communist regime was quite thoroughly hated especially along the western border areas. Second, if anything, Soviet equipment was worse then. Third, the Finnish war had been about as inept a military performance as was possible (much worse than anything from Afghanistan). Finally, Stalin had just finished killing and imprisoning about half of the senior officers. What a push-over! Yet, the Soviet armed forces proved to be much more effective than they appeared in 1941.

Cockburn may have convinced himself, he may have convinced you and me that the Soviet armed forces have severe weaknesses. But we are not the ones he has to convince. What does Chernenko think they can do? Given all the "Potemkin villages" in the Soviet system, would he learn about the failures Cockburn describes?

In conclusion then, *The Threat* is a book which is well-worth reading and, in the reviewer's opinion, probably generally correct in most of what it says. But, and it is a big but, would you want to bet your life on it?

G. Patrick Armstrong  
Directorate of Land Operational Research  
National Defence Headquarters  
Ottawa, Ontario

#### Footnotes

1. OPFOR (Opposing Force) is a training organization in the U.S. Army which uses Soviet tactics. The reviewer attended an OPFOR briefing and it is clear that the tactics work quite well.
2. Cockburn, *The Threat*, p. 125.
3. Cockburn, p. 73.
4. Cockburn, p. 174.
5. Cockburn, p. 52.

6. Grigori Potemkin was a minister of the Empress Catherine. For a tour of the Crimea in 1787 he is said to have spotted her route with prosperous looking fake villages filled with prosperous looking fake villagers. Perhaps the first Russian to have done this, he started a long and successful tradition.
7. I remember talking to a Canadian corporal who had been told only about the massed hordes and had never heard of the problems the Soviets have. One can so overdo the conventional presentation of "the Threat" that one frightens oneself to death.
8. See for example, Joseph J. Collins, "The Use of Force in Soviet Foreign Policy: the Case of Afghanistan," *Conflict Quarterly*, vol. 3, no. 3 (Spring 1983), pp. 33-35, 42-43.
9. Viktor Suvorov, *The Liberators* (London: New English Library, 1981), p. 221. The name is a pseudonym.
10. In October 1941, with the Germans advancing on Moscow, defeat of the regime seemed certain. For three days the power of the state wavered and Muscovites killed NKVD personnel and looted as their masters fled. NKVD reinforcements regained control on 19 October. Control in totalitarian states is brittle and can suddenly crack and collapse. See Nikolai Tolstoy, *Stalin's Secret War* (London: Pan Books, 1982), p. 242.
11. The designers of the first tanks in 1915 were told that the machines need be good for only 50 miles. Sir Hugh Elles, "Some Notes on Tank Development During the War," *Army Quarterly*, 11 (July 1921), p. 267. While this is perhaps too short a lifetime, these frail machines nevertheless accomplished a good deal.

Gillespie, Richard. *Soldiers of Perón: Argentina's Montoneros*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982.

This is not just "another book about Peron" to be added to an already uneven collection. On the contrary, it is a serious study of the Peronist regime in Argentina and, more specifically, of the guerrilla movement known as the Montoneros.

As the author explains, the word Montoneros comes from "montón," which in Spanish means a mountain, a collection, a pile of things, having clear pejorative connotations. One does not, for example, say a "montón" of flowers but, rather, a "montón" of trash. According to Gillespie, the name Montoneros was selected from a list of fifteen other alternatives for several reasons, which included the nostalgic memories which it brings, its nationalist and anti-imperialist appeals, and its integrative meaning for a society in which the immigrant origins of most of the population were not so distant.<sup>1</sup>

In the 19th century, Montoneros were groups of peasants—*gauchos*—engaged in warfare against the landlords of "la pampa." In the glossary of the ruling classes, Montoneros is synonymous with outlaws or bandits. In the jargon of revolutionaries, the word has a superlative meaning; Montoneros were, and are, what E. Hobsbawm once called "social bandits," of whom Robin Hood, the legendary fighter of Sherwood Forest, is the folkloric prototype. In brief, then, Montoneros were popular heroes fighting against the rich and powerful classes to protect and defend the poor and oppressed. Montoneros was the