Comparing Uses of the Strategic Defense (Fabian Strategy) by General Washington (1776-78) and Russian Generals (1904-05)

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COMPARING USES OF THE STRATEGIC DEFENSE (FABIAN STRATEGY)
BY GENERAL WASHINGTON (1776-78) AND RUSSIAN GENERALS (1904-05)

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INTRODUCTION

The Fabian strategy, also known as strategic defense, is a military strategy in which a weaker force avoids decisive battles with the enemy and creates delay in a war of attrition until the right moment arrives to deliver a decisive blow. General George Washington and his Continental Army, supplemented by the militia, employed this strategy successfully against the British Army during the War for American Independence. The Russian generals did not, however, employ a successful strategic defense against Japanese expeditionary forces in the Russo-Japanese War. To understand why, this paper considers the elements of the Fabian strategy and compares how those elements were satisfied, or not, by General Washington and the Russian generals.

A salient difference is the fact that General Washington was fighting from patriot soil on which he enjoyed good intelligence, close relations with the Continental Congress, moral support in a war for survival, and adequate sanctuary while he awaited opportunities to strike against outposts and other detachments of the British main force. Russian Generals Stessel and Kuropatkin, on the other hand, were fighting an unpopular limited war on distant foreign soil and were therefore deprived of sanctuary, good intelligence and moral support. Their delaying tactics were less hit-and-run attacks conducted on their own terms and more defend-and-retreat encounters against large, persistent and highly-motivated Japanese forces.

ELEMENTS OF THE FABIAN STRATEGY

The Fabian strategy is named after Quintus Fabius Maximus Verrucosus. Fabius defended the Roman Republic against the Carthaginian general Hannibal in southern Italy during the Second Punic War (218-202 BC). Hannibal crossed the Alps to invade Italy and decisively

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won battles against the Romans, initially the Battle of Trebbia and the Battle of Lake Trasimene. After these initial losses, Fabius was appointed dictator to stop Hannibal. Out of necessity, Fabius invented and employed the strategic defense to transform Hannibal’s decisive war into a war of attrition, attacking Hannibal when and where he was vulnerable. As a result of his successful strategy, Fabius became known as Cunctator or “The Delayer.”

During the Hundred Years’ War, French General Bertrand du Guesclin used the strategic defense to successfully force Edward the Black Prince to leave France (1370). And frontier fortifications contributed to France’s success in the 18th century wars and to the revolutionaries’ success in the French Revolution. The Fabian strategy was also used successfully by Russia to defend against Napoleon’s Grande Armée (1812), and Sam Houston is credited with using the Fabian strategy to defeat Santa Anna’s much larger force, ultimately at the 1863 Battle of San Jacinto. During the Civil War (1861-1865), General Lee’s Confederate Army used trench warfare as a delaying tactic, but European observers regarded the tactic, also used by the revolutionaries during the War for American Independence, as uniquely American and inapplicable to European warfare.

As Professor Stan Carpenter noted in his lecture, there are essential elements of a successful Fabian strategy, including: (1) incremental victories to retain troops, obtain new recruits, establish new alliances and bolster public support; (2) exhaustion of the enemy by making it costly to operate and by interdicting lines of communication and supply; (3) sanctuaries for the preservation of forces between attacks; (4) close military-political

3 Because of his use of entrenchments, General Lee was nicknamed the “King of Spades.”
5 Ibid., 12 (for General Washington, “the preservation of his army was a higher object.”).
coordination; (5) light, mobile forces; and (6) a final, devastating blow. It should be added that essential elements include the luxury of good intelligence to keep track of the location and strength of enemy forces and the luxury of time to wait for the appropriate moments to strike.

There are also political obstacles to overcome. While incremental successes increase morale, the use of a defensive strategy can be politically unpopular because it involves continual retreat against weaker elements of the main force, which can be perceived as cowardly. In addition, there is less luxury of time in democratic societies. Public support of war is crucial in a democratic society, and voters do not have the patience needed for a prolonged war. Civilians will naturally have more patience when their army is fighting a war of survival than they will during a limited war that is being fought abroad against an enemy that poses no apparent threat to national security.

As discussed below, General Washington satisfied all of the essential elements of a Fabian strategy and withstood political obstacles. The Russian generals, on the other hand, did neither.

THE FABIAN STRATEGY USED BY GENERAL WASHINGTON

After a devastating defeat at the Battle of Long Island (1776), and after his “war of posts” proved to be equally unsuccessful, General Washington and his council of generals finally realized that they needed to avoid direct confrontations with the main British army.\(^6\) Unlike Washington’s war of posts, the aim of the strategic defense “was to defend not any geographic area or point but the existence of his army.”\(^7\) As a Colonial officer, Washington had seen Indian warfare, so he understood that the same style of fighting could be applied against the British Army’s traditional battle style.

\(^6\) Ibid., 11.
\(^7\) Ibid., 12.
Known as the “American Fabius,” Washington used the strategic defense successfully, because it satisfied all of the elements enumerated by Professor Carpenter for a successful Fabian strategy. At Trenton (1776), Princeton (1777), Germantown 1777) and Monmouth (1778), Washington’s Continental Army, complemented by the militia, attacked parts, not the main, of General Howe’s and General Clinton’s forces. Ultimately, Washington had good intelligence to bring the war to an end by delivering a decisive blow against a weakened part of the British southern forces at Yorktown.

The succession of victories (1776-78) increased the number and morale of the Continental Army and the militia, it solidified patriot support, and it brought about alliances with France (1778) and later with Spain (1979). Due to good intelligence, Washington’s hit-and-run tactics wore down the spirit of the British Army. Washington enjoyed the sanctuary of Valley Forge and Morristown between attacks, he had close, fruitful ties with the Continental Congress, and his forces, especially the militia, were light and therefore mobile. Ultimately, again because of good intelligence, he was able to deliver a devastating final blow at Yorktown.

Because of his successes at Trenton, Princeton, Germantown and Monmouth, Washington’s strategy withstood the criticism of its detractors which John Adams expressed in a letter to his wife Abigail: “I am sick of Fabian systems in all quarters. . . My toast is [to a] short and violent war.” Although civilians have little patience for a prolonged war, especially in a democratic society, Washington benefited from the fact that the War for American Independence was being waged on patriot soil and was therefore a war of survival.

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8 John Adams, Abigail Adams and Charles Adams, Familiar Letters of John Adams, and His Wife Abigail Adams during the Revolution, with a Memoir of Mrs. Adams (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1876), 305.
THE STRATEGIC DEFENSE USED BY GENERAL KUROPAKTIN DURING THE RUSSO-JAPANESE WAR

General Kuropatkin was commander of Russia’s Far Eastern Armies during the Russo-Japanese War. He executed the strategic defense so poorly that few if any writers will dignify it by calling it a Fabian strategy. In 1904, combined Japanese land and sea forces acted more precipitously and forcefully in Manchuria than Russia had anticipated, and Russia therefore had inadequate forces there to answer the Japanese attack. After the Japanese navy’s surprise attack at Port Arthur on February 8, 1904, Japanese expeditionary forces landed first at Inchon and then at Dalnyi. The forces from Dalnyi took Port Arthur, and the forces from Inchon pushed Russian forces from the Yalu River back to Harbin.

Russia needed reinforcements from western Russia to suppress the Japanese forces. This meant a journey of about 7500 miles along the Trans-Siberian Railroad, which required a month to complete under favorable conditions. The railway was the dominant line of communication to eastern Russia, but it was only a single track, which required the time-consuming procedure of using sidings along the way, and a slow ferry was required to cross Lake Baikal. The Japanese timed their attack at the time of year when it was most difficult to cross the lake due to ice. The transit of Russian troops and materiel by sea was even slower, requiring the Baltic Fleet to conduct a seven-month journey of approximately 18,000 miles.

The Russian military was therefore forced to adopt a strategic defense until troops and materiel could be transferred from western Russia. As Fuller notes, Kuropatkin’s plan was to buy time for the deployment of additional Russian troops by using “holding actions and strategic

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9 Fuller calls Kuropatkin’s strategy “alternating tenacious holding actions and strategic withdrawals” and does not refer to Fabius. William C. Fuller, Jr., Strategy and Power in Russia, 1600-1914 (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 400.
withdrawals . . . to deny Tokyo an early victory.” Kuropatkin described a classic Fabian strategy in his stated intent to “avoid decisive engagements in order to escape being defeated in detail prior to the concentration of forces sufficient for the defeat of the Japanese.”

Russian General Stessel slowed the advance of Japanese forces from Dalnyi to Port Arthur through counter-mobility measures, including a ring of fortifications outside the port town. After six months, however (from May through November 1904), the Japanese broke through the fortifications, and after a loss of 10,000 lives, captured the critical 203 Meter Hill from which they bombarded the remaining Russian Pacific Fleet. General Stessel surrendered on December 29, 1904.

Russian General Kuropatkin was just as ineffective at slowing the advance of Japanese expeditionary forces that landed at, and advanced from, Inchon. In May 1904, Japanese Field-Marshal Oyama defeated Russian General Zasulitch at Yalu River, and Japanese forces pushed from Korea into Manchuria. During the Battle of Liaoyang (August to September 1904), General Kuropatkin engaged in a series of withdrawals and counterattacks, but his Russian forces were forced to retreat to the Sha-ho River where they regrouped. Follow-on attempts to disrupt Japanese lines of communication and supply were, however, largely unsuccessful (October 1904). At San-de-pu (January 1905), Russian troops launched an unsuccessful counter-offensive and had to withdraw to an area south of the city of Mukden. By this time, Port Arthur had fallen to the Japanese.

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11 Fuller, Strategy and Power in Russia, 400 (quoting Russko-iaponskaia voina 1904-05 gg. 1 (St. Petersburg, 1910), 192).
12 Ibid., 401.
Then, at the famous Battle of Mukden (February to March 1905), the Russians hastily built trenches, but failed to conceal them properly. Furthermore, when the Japanese attacked, the Russian troops left their entrenchments to fight, less effectively, in the open. After 100,000 of his men had been killed, wounded or captured, Kuropatkin withdrew to Harbin, ceding Mukden to the Japanese.

**ANALYSIS OF THE DIFFERENCES**

The main reason that the Fabian strategy worked better for General Washington than it did for Generals Stessel and Kuropatkin was that Washington was fighting a war of survival from his homeland, whereas Russian troops were fighting an unpopular, limited war in a distant foreign theater. As a result, Washington had the luxury of sanctuary in Morristown and Valley Forge, whereas Stessel was besieged at Port Arthur, and Kuropatkin was constantly under attack by aggressive Japanese forces. Neither Russian general had opportunities to find and exploit the vulnerabilities of Japanese forces. Contrary to the doctrine cited by General Washington, the Russian generals used their delaying tactics to defend geographic areas rather than the existence of the Russian army. Their strategy therefore resembled Washington’s war of posts more than his Fabian strategy.

Washington also received excellent intelligence and counsel from the Continental Congress, whereas Kuropatkin, who was not an exceptional field commander to begin with, received little or no useful guidance from Moscow. Good intelligence and counsel are additional

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14 Ibid., 14. Incidentally, some observers, including American Major Joseph E. Kuhn, reached the incorrect conclusion that frontal assaults were effective against entrenchments.

reasons that Washington was able to demoralize the British Army by inflicting costly damage to troops and lines of communication and supply. Without proper sanctuary, intelligence and counsel, the best the Russians could do to slow the advance of Japanese troops was to build entrenchments and other fortifications which the Japanese managed to overrun through persistence and the sheer force of numbers.

Given the lack of proper sanctuary and good intelligence, it is purely academic to note, as well, that the Russian army lacked the mobility, as well as the good network of communications, that Washington and his Continental Army enjoyed. As Koda notes, “the Russian army was too cumbersome and unwieldy to wage the warfare of maneuver that the vast expanse of the Manchurian plain required.”\(^{16}\) Without mobility and good communications, the Russian forces “could not conduct coordinated mobile operations and night engagements.”\(^{17}\)

**CONCLUSION**

History has shown that the strategic defense is effective under the right conditions. When effective, historians credit it with the descriptor “Fabian.” Historians therefore include General Washington among generals who have employed the Fabian strategy, alongside French General Bertrand du Guesclin and the illustrious American Sam Houston. They do not include General Kuropatkin or General Stessel. Among many arguable factors, General Washington was successful mostly because he was fighting a war of survival from his homeland. Because of this, his troops were highly motivated, intelligence and communications were good, and there were places of sanctuary. Given these basic ingredients, it also helped that Washington was a capable field commander and that his troops were light and mobile.


\(^{17}\) Ibid.
On the other hand, the Russian generals in Manchuria were fighting an unpopular, distant war. They were therefore fighting a limited war, and they lacked good intelligence, counsel and sanctuary. Even if they had enjoyed these basic elements of strategic defense, General Kuropatkin was not an especially capable field commander, and his forces were not adequately mobile to conduct hit-and-run tactics. The use of entrenchments was a clever expedient, but since the art and science had not yet been developed, they were not well positioned and employed. In sum, the delaying strategy of the Russians was not effective at preserving Russian forces in Manchuria until reinforcements from western Russia could arrive.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


