

Thesis review for:
Alexander George Hlosek
Russo-Ukrainian War through the Lens of Sun Tzu

By:
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The author seeks to answer the questions, “How do Russia’s successes and failures in Ukraine relate to Sun Tzu’s guide for fighting wars? And two sub-questions: 1. Have there been cases of Russian strategy adapting from initial failures? 2. How does Russian strategy in Ukraine differ from official doctrine?” (Abstract) To answer the questions, the author utilizes Sun Tzu’s Five Constant Factors and Five Essentials to Predict Victory, and applies them to Russia’s actions during the first two years of the war following the February 2022 invasion. (2.4, 2.5) The author concludes that, while Russia is learning from its mistakes and adapting its tactics accordingly, “empirical findings ... show that the reality on the ground contradicts both Sun Tzu’s concepts and official [Russian] doctrine.” (52)

The author has a very timely and pressing topic. The work does a good job at methodically breaking down Sun Tzu’s core criteria, applying that criteria to Russian operations, and assessing those operations accordingly. The author’s findings are in line with professional assessments of Russia’s operations, in particular their learning and adaptation throughout the war, as well as their deviation from established doctrine and the consequences of that deviation. Overall, the author has produced a valuable analysis that both accurately breaks down a current event of interest as well as attaching that analysis to one of the guiding texts of war studies.

The author’s argument is impressive in many ways, but also has some problems. Perhaps due to the nature of the core of the framework, the author spends a great deal of time defending the choice of Sun Tzu and situating Sun Tzu’s concepts within more contemporary literature. In many ways, this choice seems necessary and unavoidable, yet it also pulls away from the core argument about analyzing the events. This is not really a problem to be placed upon the author, but a complication in the argument that the author has done his best to embrace and overcome. Substantively, the author achieves this. The route is not as elegant and parsimonious as that provided by more contemporary thinkers, though. Aside from this, there are technical aspects that unfortunately detract from the author’s otherwise strong argument. The Table of Contents is not organized according to chapters and subchapters as outlined in the work, which makes orientation problematic. The aforementioned need to justify Sun Tzu makes the framework a bit longer and more complicated than is generally desired, which also postpones the analysis. Finally, the structure adopted by way of Sun Tzu makes the argument a bit fractured at times, again following the pattern of the guiding text.

The majority of these problems are the result of the author faithfully making direct use of one of the key texts of the field, which is not often done. In light of this, these problems should be noted for their presence, but not held against the author. To the contrary, the analysis is a strong statement of both the author’s abilities as well as the enduring relevance of Sun Tzu’s millennia-old guide. Indeed, looking back on the war through the lens of Sun Tzu, one can see the maxims of Sun Tzu appear again and again. Know the enemy and know yourself, a message Russia failed

to heed. Attack the enemies alliances and strategy, a lesson the Russians are quickly learning to pay more attention to. Avoid destroying cities, a lesson we all wish they'd incorporate.

The work is impressive, and I recommend that it be given a lower A/excellent.

A few questions:

1. Recently, some irritated Republicans in Congress lamented the observable fact that various Russian propaganda talking points have made their way into the discourse and positions of their fellow Republican officials. Discuss this via Sun Tzu's guidance of how to effectively wage war.
2. A common phrase associated with Russian strategy is "Quantity has a quality all its own." How does this fit with Sun Tzu's guidance?
3. Given the repeated instances of Ukraine's President intervening, replacing, and commenting on military leadership, is there perhaps a case to be made that Ukraine needs to pay greater attention to Sun Tzu as well?