

52 Russia Seminar 2024

Length of recording: 37 minutes

Transcription notes

Interviewer: Janne Pukkila
Respondent 1: Bettina Renz
Respondent 2: Jonna Alava

wo- an unfinished word
(word) an uncertain passage in speech or an unrecognised speaker
(-) an unrecognisable word
(--) unrecognisable words
[pause 10 s] a pause in speech of at least 10 seconds

, . ? : a grammatically correct punctuation mark or a pause in speech of less than 10 seconds

Janne Pukkila: Hello and welcome to our latest podcast. My name is Lieutenant Colonel Janne Pukkila, I am from the Russian Research Group from the National Defence University. And today, our theme is going to be Russian research and Russia Seminar in National Defence University in Finland.

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Janne Pukkila: So we will start today's podcast from our panellist, so to say. With me, I have our professor, Bettina Renz, and a researcher, Jonna Alava, today, and we are going to discuss about how to make Russian research and how we are doing the Russian research in National Defence University. And regarding our upcoming plans, we are going to discuss also about the Russia Seminar, which is going to be held in mid-February.

So, Bettina, welcome. You are our latest member of Russian Research Group at the Department of Warfare at the National Defence University. So first of all, welcome, you are coming from University of Nottingham, and we are happy to have you here for the next six months. So could you please tell us about little bit from your background and how did you decide to... and how we were so lucky and we managed to get you as a member of our group here in Helsinki, in Finland?

Bettina Renz: Thank you very much. I'm extremely happy to be here, I think I'm the lucky one actually to get to study here and to work and cooperate with colleagues in the Russia Research Group. So actually, Finland is the country I've spent most time in after the UK and Russia, where I spent a lot of time during the 1990s and 2000s, when it comes to studying, and I'll talk about that a little bit more. So I started off studying Russian language in the 1990s at the University of Edinburgh. I then wrote

my PhD on civil–military relations in Russia, during Putin’s first term, so I started in around 2000. I was inspired at the time by the prominence of Alexander (-) [02:27] who was a big figure in Russian politics at the time, and a lot of questions were raised about the impact of (him) (--) role of the military in Russian politics. But I ended up writing about (--) also with Putin’s own background and so on in Russian politics.

Unfortunately, it has to be said that, in the UK and the US and some other countries further towards the west of Europe, there was a decreased interest in Russia in the 2000s and the first decade of the 21st century. There was very much when it comes to the study of the military, military reforms, capabilities, and so on, the focus on the global war on terrorism, on counterinsurgencies, on small wars, and also the perception – mistakenly, in my view – that Russia no longer mattered or was too weak to really deserve academic attention. And this, of course, was not the case in Finland, where people always maintained, for obvious reason, an interest in the Russian military and in Russia as a neighbouring state.

So I always, from the beginning, continued working with colleagues in Finland (--) [03:34] interest here in my research as well. I quite often, 20 years ago already, presented at the Aleksanteri Institute. And actually, I looked it up, and the first lecture I ever gave at the Finnish National Defence University was in 2013, where I talked about Russian military modernization. Then later, in 2015-16, I worked on a project on Russia and hybrid warfare, funded by the Finnish Prime Minister’s office’s research funds together with my colleague, Hanna Smith, and it was also then when I met other researchers here at the FNDU, in the Russia Research Group, who work here now, like Katri Pynnöniemi and Simo Pesu, and so on. So when the opportunity came up to come here as a visiting professor, it certainly didn’t take much persuading, and I absolutely jumped at the chance, and I’m very happy to be here.

Janne Pukkila: Well, thank you. It was a nice introduction to you and Finland, how Finland and you belong together, for a long time already. And as I said, we are really happy to have you here, and we are waiting for a lot from this cooperation, and of course, we are happy to give you some points of view from our side.

But what has been your background regarding the Russian research, and what’s your specialty regarding the Russian research? What’s your, let’s say, main theme which you like to express all the time and everywhere, or is it overall Russia and Russian military?

Bettina Renz: So, I would say, overall, my central interest is the role of the Russian military, and I include here other... not just the regular armed forces, but I’ve also looked at the FSB, SVR, and other parts of the Russian security sector and their role as an instrument of state power or state politics. So within that overall interest, I’m particularly interested in military reforms and military modernization. Again, we can’t just look at the military (--) [05:44] what kind of technology do they have, and so

on, how many soldiers do they have, but of course, (they have this for a reason), so why does Russia have the military it has. In connection to that, also interested in concepts and strategic vision, again, how does Russia view its role in the world, what does that mean for the kind of military it wants and needs, and so on. So obviously, I do not come from a military background. I know, I can distinguish between tactics and operations and strategy, but obviously, most usefully, I think I can contribute to the more strategic and political level of this kind of discussions. Also civil–military relations I’m very interested in. Again, I look at war from a Clausewitzian perspective, war is a social activity where, again, we cannot understand the military or warfare just by looking at the military itself, we need to understand the states, society, the relationship between society and the armed forces, the political leadership and the armed forces, and so on. And increasingly, I’ve developed an interest and in connection to all of this, in the sources of military effectiveness. So again, you are aware that there has been a big discussion after the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, started about why so many people seem to have got the Russian military wrong, and so on. So again, I think the (explanations there are) [07:10] that too many people try to understand the military... or the Russian military just by looking at the military itself and disregarding a lot of other issues. The approach to my research, so on the one hand, is of course interdisciplinary Russian area studies, so... Well, in the past, (going, of course, to the) country and speaking to people, that’s no longer possible, but using also Russian... as much as possible, Russian sources that we still have access to. And obviously, there’s a lot of that here at the FNDU also that I use. But that, in combination with strategic studies, so I combine the area studies approach with contemporary thinking on strategy and warfare. I think that’s important then again to explain the idiosyncrasies of developments in Russia to Western military thinkers and Western military practitioners and so on, to put it into a language understandable.

Janne Pukkila: Yeah, thank you. I think nowadays it’s really important to have the Russian research, and as we have noticed, that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has increased the importance of all kind of Russia research, so it’s good to hear that we have that kind of approach from your side, which we can now use in our teaching and, of course, in the research programmes.

But what are your expectations, while you are working with us here in Helsinki, what are you expecting to gain or actually give to the community?

Bettina Renz: Thank you, so yes, I hope to both gain and also give, of course, so it’s a huge privilege to work with the Russia Research Group. There are not that many places elsewhere where there’s such a concentration of people who know Russia so well, speak obviously the language really well, much better than me in most cases, and have spent a lot of time there. And also, importantly, as I mentioned before, in Finland, that institutional understanding and memory of Russia and relations with Russia and Russian motivations and so on has never really disappeared, so there is a lot of knowledge here, people that can put also developments in Russia today into

the historical context, because they have been looking at the country over a long period of time, and so on. So what I'm hoping from the point of view of gaining is obviously through cooperation and discussion with colleagues here to strengthen my own research, as I mentioned, also to use library resources, which are really amazing.

In terms of giving, of course, also I publish, still have a different perspective that I hopefully will bring in, focused on different areas. In terms of research, what I'm writing here and where obviously the Russia Research Group will be fully acknowledged is my second book on the Russian military going forward. Also I will contribute, of course, to the Russia Seminar in mid-February, where I will talk about civil-military relations and, in particular, the lessons that hadn't been taken into account from the comparative literature before the invasion or the start of the big war in February 2022 and what we can learn from that from things we hadn't studied before about going forward about studying Russian civil-military relations. I will also, of course, write a paper, I will continue discussing with colleagues here how else I contribute to the research. And obviously, I'm also hoping to be involved in the teaching that is taking place here. I will be giving... Already one lecture was agreed on some broader strategic aspects, I also teach strategic studies, not specifically regarding Russia, (in March, and) [11:00] hopefully more opportunities will come up here.

Janne Pukkila: Great to hear. You mentioned about our Russian Seminar and you mentioned about Ukraine, and as you also told, that you are going to give the keynote speech or lesson in our seminar. But how do you assess the so far made and, let's say, international research regarding the Ukraine war or the Russian invasion to Ukraine? Do you see that we are doing exactly the right research regarding the war of Ukraine, or is there something, let's say, overlapping issues which we are always doing, especially in Western countries or in Europe-US cooperation, or should we take the point of view from the other angle? Or how do you see the overall research which we have done or the community research the community has done so far?

Bettina Renz: Yeah, it's a big question, obviously, there is a really big debate about what Western analysts of Russia got right, what they got wrong, and how to take it forward. It's a difficult one. I think, obviously, we need to learn some lessons, I think there probably, overall, was an overemphasis, as I mentioned before, of the hard military issues, how many numbers (of personnel, the) [12:34] technology, maybe also doctrine, and so on, which was quite well understood, at an expense of the more soft aspects, as they are sometimes seen in military capabilities, such as civil-military relations, but also personal aspects: why do Russian soldiers join the armed forces, what questions of moral, and so on (--) in that respect. Maybe also strategic culture, of course, people spoke about that before. It's a very, very difficult thing to study, but nonetheless, I think all of these issues are important to look into.

At the same time, I think this idea that we can get it completely right or we know exactly what we need to study to get it right is problematic, because war and warfare is very unpredictable. And a lot of these issues are also (-) and cannot be measured as such. I mean, I don't need to tell you, with your background, that motivation, for example, is not something measurable, (it will) [13:39] depend on the context, on the situation, and so on. So just as we now know what we didn't know and what we should have studied before the invasion in 2022, going forward, there will be other things that we don't realize now are important, and I think we can never fully overcome that, although we should, of course, try.

I think, if anything good can be said to have come of this horrendous and on-going war, as far as we can talk about anything good, I think... Like you already said, there are now more people interested in studying the Russian military and Russia more widely. More resource is hopefully (also spent) on studying this, so (improvements are) certainly possible.

Another issue, of course, that was a problem, especially at the very start of the invasion, was our lack of knowledge about the Ukrainian military, of course. And again, I know there is more interest in that now. I also work on a small project that we started in 2019, but of course, again, even (there the...) [14:49] what we thought was significant then has changed quite a bit in the meantime with the on-going war.

Janne Pukkila: OK, thank you. Thank you, Bettina, and now I think we will turn to Jonna as well. Since Russia Research Group was established in 2017, we have expanded regarding the number of people, how many people we have in this group, and you, Bettina, you are, as our latest member, a really, really welcome person in our group. But Jonna, you have been in our group a couple of years now, and you are, like, research in our group, but you are also making a dissertation to Helsinki University. So how do you feel your job and your overall, let's say, study, what you are doing, while you are making your dissertation to Helsinki University and, as a researcher, to Russia Research Group in FNDU. So how do you feel your position?

Jonna Alava OK, thank you. Good. Yeah, I do dissertation for University of Helsinki, and I get the degree from there, and I have done all the compulsory studies there. But at the same time, I have worked here, in Russia Research Group, and this is actually my fourth year already. And I think this dual position has been a privilege, because colleagues here do military studies, and I understand all the time better how these military studies can support my own studies and vice versa. And I teach here about my topic, military-patriotic education, and also about the Russian culture and mentality.

And compared to, like, normal PhD done in one university, I think I had more opportunities. I've been in different doctoral seminars and different civil and military conferences, workshops with different sectors of society, and as a research group, we have built international connections and travelled and... Yeah, it's been a really

privilege. And I have enjoyed National Defence University very much. And I had no clue about army or army culture before this. And I have been positively surprised how nice people are here and how everything works and how high-level research is done here.

My dissertation is about military-patriotic education in Russia, and it's not about the warfare, but more about the militarization and preparing for the war. And maybe it's about the civil-military relation as well. And I hope this kind of... We could have this kind of positions more in the future to make more cooperation with the civilian, military sides and institutions. And as Bettina mentioned, there have been a gap in research about civil-military relations, and I think this kind of positions could respond to that gap.

Janne Pukkila: Thank you, and as I said to Bettina, we are happy that we have a lot of experience from different kind of angles regarding Russian research. You mentioned that your PhD theme is patriotic-military education or military-patriotic education, but it's also regarding about Russian military, Yunarmiya, and women in arms. So what can you tell us about that theme?

Jonna Alava OK, thanks. (I think the) [19:19] whole dissertation project started when I saw pictures of Yunarmiya in internet. Yunarmiya could be translated as Young Army in Russian. And it's a military-patriotic organization. And these pictures resembled Soviet pioneers very much. (And there were) very much girls in those pictures. And I found it very contradictory, because women's rights in Russia have been narrowed, and same time, this kind of traditional gender roles were emphasized, so what is this all about, and why they need girls in this kind of very masculine hobby?

And five years ago, when I started, there was 100,000 members in Yunarmiya, and nowadays, there is more, 1,500,000 members. And they are bringing new soldiers and militarize young generation. And Yunarmiya operates in every school at the moment in Russia. For example, the Yunarmiya members educate deported Ukrainian children in re-education camps at the moment, so they partly participate in this genocide. But Yunarmiya's still just one project of this whole military-patriotic system in Russia, which penetrate the whole society at the moment.

But about the girls in the pictures, this theme led me to write the second article about the Russian women soldiers, because I wanted to know what the state wants about these girls, and do they want more women in the Russian armed forces. And now I can say that, no, that is not the case, but the main thing is to militarize women to support their husband and believe in Russian regime.

There is about 40,000 women soldiers in Russian army at the moment, but they end up very supportive positions and face many constraints, and there's discrimination. Russian army is... I could describe it, it's still very sexist. For example, they organize

many kind of beauty contest every year. But nowadays, I think, in Russia, women's primarily value is in motherhood, and that is the, like, deepest reason that Russian army do not integrate seriously women. And in Ukraine, we haven't seen any Russian women soldiers, which is a quite contrast to Ukraine. There are women in Russian army and battlefields, but they are not in any dangerous or visible positions. And I think the reason lies in the Kremlin narratives. Kremlin, Russia defends conservative world order and traditional values, which includes traditional gender roles as well. And this is all about the men's war. And I think fighting and emancipated women soldiers do not sit in this picture well. But I don't know, Russia need new soldiers desperately, and they may recruit women to the battlefields as well, but before that, they must change these narratives to legitimate the use of women.

Janne Pukkila: OK, thank you, that's an interesting point of view that, really, this old Soviet pioneer system has now changed just the name, but became as a Yunarmiya again, so it's a reborn old Soviet system, which they are going to... Well, actually, this started that already again. But on the other hand, you mentioned that it's men's war, in fact, but I would say that the war always causes some kind of effects to the society and the country as a whole. So as I've understood, your research is also concerned or making some kind of notes also to the society and what kind of changes has appeared within the society. So what are your observations regarding the Russian society after the war started in February 2022?

Jonna Alava Yeah, after the beginning of the war, I noticed very quickly that the whole patriotic education in schools was transformed to support the war. And the military-patriotic education became, like, mainstream and obligatory for all. And there have been many new patriotic initiatives after the beginning of the war in schools, and they include, for example, national anthem, flag-raising. There are new propaganda lessons. OK, they don't say they are propaganda, but the content is that. And all history books are new, and they introduce this special military operation and explain that for new generation in Russia. And there are military training lessons, and in every school, there is a new post of educational advisors, but they are rather like political commissars, what they had in Soviet times, but never in schools, but now there is in schools this kind of phenomenon.

In this year, they introduce school uniforms for all. And there's a new patriotic organization which aims to reach all 18 millions underaged Russians. So I have argued that this is not the patriotic education anymore, this is indoctrination. And I think the reason for this is that Kremlin fears new generations. One reason is they want to ensure adequacy of new soldiers, but the main thing is to keep people silent and monitor them and oppress them (to show) [27:21] ritual support for the Kremlin.

What we see in schools is increasing monitoring. There's denunciations and repression. Patriotism has become a norm in everyday life in public space in Russia. And thousands of teachers have left the country, and for many families, this new kind of patriotic education in school was a reason to emigrate. And there is resistance

in Russia, OK, in schools, I think, in a broader sense, in society also, but it very quickly, after the beginning of the war, turned to the kind of silent form. So at the individual level, people can sabotage education and try to avoid it, but it's becoming harder all the time. And I think the content of the propaganda is not effective. And even the patriots do not like it, because it's boring, it's time-consuming. But on the other hand, I think the whole patriotic system has been effective, because it offers a framework through which the state legitimate growing repression. Educational institutions in Russia are not free at any level anymore. One respondent said, like, there's going on Cold Civil War in Russian schools.

About the people, I think people are scared and don't speak with each other anymore. And this leads to, like, atomized society, when it's very difficult to gather anymore and resist anything. And I think Russia is not a totalitarian country in every sense, but there is strong features of growing use of power. And on the other hand, how people react and behave there. This kind of Soviet-style double thinking or double life became mainstream. And I think it's sad that new generation learn this model and it becomes like a normal and norm.

Janne Pukkila: So can we say that it's like double standards are coming back?

Jonna Alava Yeah, exactly. And I think when people hide their private opinions, for us, it's more difficult to predict the future. But this applies also to those in power in Russia. So what we can say is, like, anything can happen very quickly – or not. There could be a long stagnation also. But I think now the repression is only hardening in Russia. There's a lot of silent, this kind of silent resistance and dissatisfaction, but not necessarily related... it's not related to the on-going war or opposing the war. But something need to happen that could kick off kind of snowball effect in society.

Janne Pukkila: All right, thank you. Let's say that I think we all need a crystal ball to make our predictions, and of course, it's always easy to make, let's say, old-fashioned predictions and assessments, but to make bold predictions, it's always a new way to make assessments and analyses. And that's why I think our upcoming sixth-in-a-row Russia Seminar, which is going to be held 14th and 15th of February, it's going to be really interesting event from that sense, because we are going to have over 20 international speakers, including also our own speakers and analysts from Finland. And within two days, we are going to discuss a lot of topics regarding Russia, and the theme of the Russian Seminar in February is going to be Russia's war against Ukraine and complexity of contemporary Clausewitzian war. So at the end, I would like to ask what are your expectations regarding the seminar, and what are you expecting from that seminar from that sense? And do you think that we are going to get the crystal ball from that seminar, and how we can use all the people who are coming and gathering here to share our opinions and make our predictions for the future, what is regarding to the Russia? Bettina?

Bettina Renz: Difficult one! Well, the seminar will be fantastic, like you said, more than 20 international researchers in addition to people from Finland. I think this is the best we can do in terms of trying to anticipate the future, which, in my view, just cannot be absolutely predicted with certainty, because you get people from different backgrounds, different perspectives, who have different areas of expertise and views on Russia as well. So I think, from this point of view, this is the best we can do to exchange views and explore plausible futures. I think the future, including of the war, actually, the on-going Russia-Ukrainian war cannot be predicted, because the history or the future hasn't been written yet. Things can happen that nobody might have thought of at this point that maybe even decisionmakers (--) [34:06] involved, including the Russian President or Ukrainian leadership, and so on, haven't even made yet. So I think... Of course, we should try, we need to think about how the future can or will or might pan out, but I think we need to be careful not to think that the right answer is necessarily out there already.

Janne Pukkila: Good. How about Jonna, anything to add?

Jonna Alava Yeah, personally, I'm waiting to meet many Ukrainian researchers in seminar and to really hear their experiences and views. And there's also many really fresh civil-military relation topics, highly interesting, and I don't know about the crystal ball [laughs], but who knows!

Janne Pukkila: That's the million dollar question always. Yeah, I think we have now discuss about the Russian research, and I welcomed you, Bettina, as a member of our group, and also we heard about Jonna's interesting research and topics and how you both feel the Russian research.

As a moderator, I want to thank you both, and a very interesting discussion today regarding the Russian research. And for our listeners and people who are listening the podcast afterwards, I would say that Russian research is, from the military point of view, not only the military topics, but it's wider-perspective research, and that's why we are really happy that we have this kind of people in our group.

And as a advertisement, as a reminder, repeat, once again, please join us in mid-February, 14th and 15th of February, when our Russia Seminar 2024 is going to be held. And it's also available online, so you can listen and make your own predictions regarding the topics and the themes afterwards online.

So thank you, both of you, and have a nice day. And all our listeners, thank you for listening and stay tuned. Bye-bye!

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