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Pieter Garicano, Grace Mappes, and Frederick W. Kagan

POSITIONAL WARFARE IN ALEXANDER SVECHIN'S *STRATEGY*

WAR STUDIES OCCASIONAL PAPER SERIES

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INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF WAR

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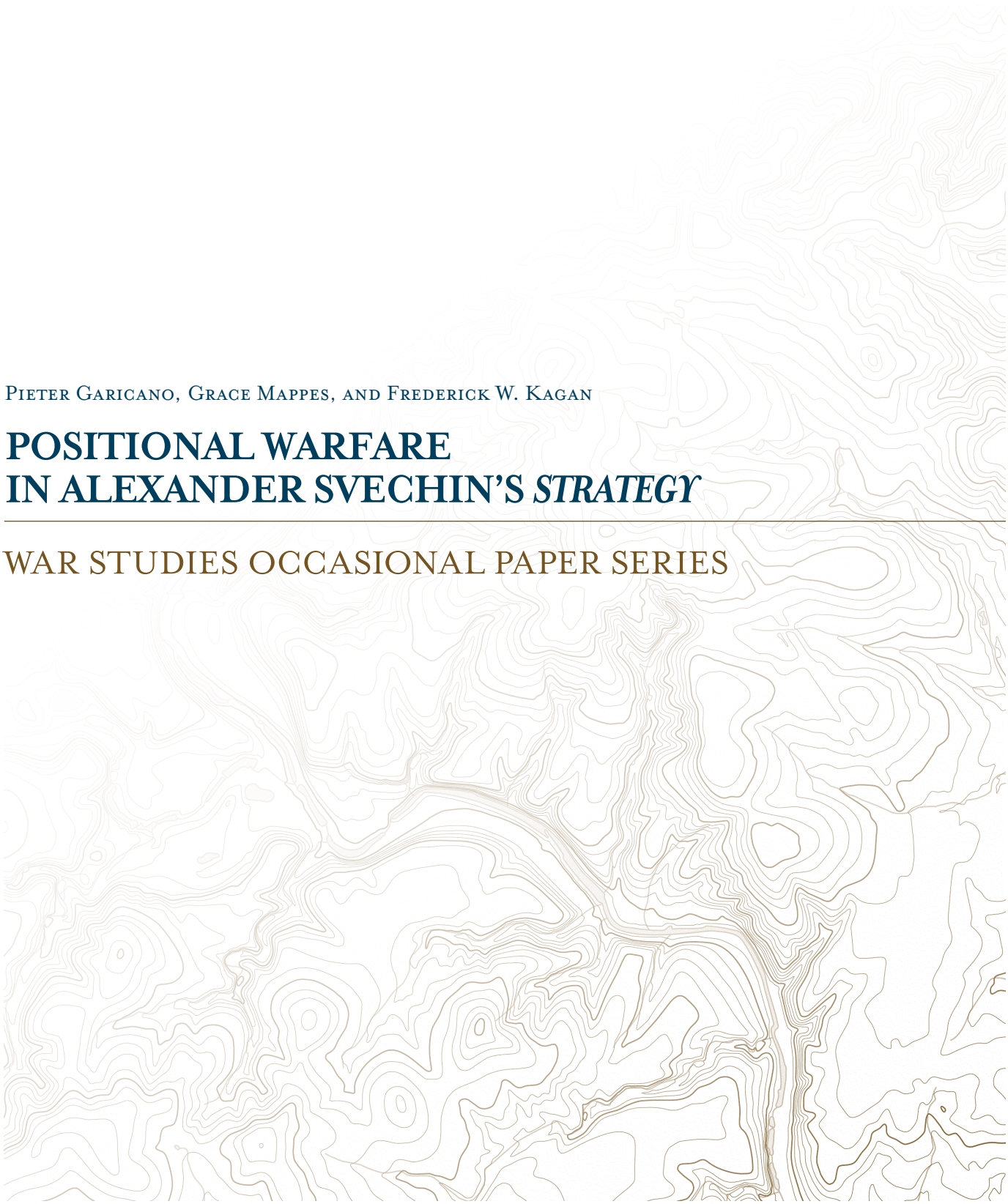

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Introduction

Discussions of the character of the Russian war in Ukraine have increasingly adopted terms such as "stalemate" and "attritional" to describe the state of the conflict. Both terms draw parallels with the Western Front of the First World War that are not wholly inaccurate but that can be misleading if taken too far. The current Russian war in Ukraine is certainly not stalemated in the sense of having reached a point where neither side can make further progress. Nor is it, properly speaking, attritional. An attritional war is one in which attrition itself is the victory mechanism — that is, one side aims to win by wearing the other down through losses. The Germans indeed pursued an explicitly attritional campaign in the 1916 Battle of Verdun. But neither the Russians nor the Ukrainians are currently seeking to win by imposing greater losses on the adversary. They are, rather, engaged in a kind of war best described as "positional." Positional war is characterized by relatively static frontlines and regular combat that produces little movement, but the aim of such combat is generally either to create forward progress through steady if small advances or to create conditions to restore maneuver to the battlefield. This essay explores one of the most detailed considerations of positional warfare, offered by Soviet military theorist Alexander Svechin in his 1926 work, *Strategy* — a work that has influenced the Soviet, Russian, and Ukrainian militaries. It offers an important corrective to our understanding of the current conflict and its likely trajectories.

The current Russian war in Ukraine is certainly not stalemated in the sense of having reached a point where neither side can make further progress.

What is Positional Warfare?

Former Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi assessed in a November 2023 essay for the *Economist* that the war in Ukraine had reached a phase of "positional warfare."[1] "Positional warfare" is ill-defined and poorly understood in Western military thought. Positional warfare does not mean "stalemate" but is instead an often temporary phase of warfare characterized by relatively static front lines and attacks that generate only small gains. Positional warfare contrasts with maneuver warfare in which combatants seek to penetrate enemy defensive lines, exploit those penetrations, and make large and rapid gains. Combatants in a positional war can still achieve tactical and strategic battlefield effects through localized engagements and "material battle," but they often rightly focus on seeking to restore maneuver war as General Zaluzhnyi's essay did.

Positional warfare contrasts with maneuver warfare in which combatants seek to penetrate enemy defensive lines, exploit those penetrations, and make large and rapid gains.

Soviet military theorist Alexander Svechin offers the most detailed and insightful discussion of positional warfare and makes suggestions about how to make gains during the positional phase of a struggle even while trying to restore maneuver. Svechin and his 1926 work *Strategy* have significantly influenced Soviet and post-Soviet military thought. Prominent Soviet and Russian military figures have cited Svechin in their works and speeches since the early 1990s, including the last Soviet Chief of the General Staff Army General Vladimir Lobov, and the current Russian Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov.[2] Svechin's writings thus likely offer meaningful insights into the ways in which the combatants in the Russian war in Ukraine understand the current battlefield situation.

Svechin and his 1926 work Strategy have significantly influenced Soviet and post-Soviet military thought.

Svechin never explicitly defines the concept of positional warfare in *Strategy*. He does, however, provide an overview of the factors that lead to positional warfare, the combat that characterizes it, and how commanders can break out of a positional front. Svechin's notable influence in the Soviet and post-Soviet sphere and detailed discussion of a form of warfare not recently observed in major military conflicts make Svechin's ideas particularly informative to Western military thinkers seeking to understand the current positional front in Ukraine.

Positional warfare becomes near certain if both sides pursue negative goals.

Factors that Lead to Positional Warfare According to Svechin

Positional warfare is the product of both external and internal conditions. Svechin identifies the objectives and capabilities of the combatants as the two primary factors that can lead a war to assume a positional form. Battlefield commanders pursue either positive or negative objectives.[3] Positive objectives seek to alter the status quo and are offensive, whereas negative objectives seek to deny the enemy the ability to pursue positive objectives.[4] There are two possible positive objectives in positional warfare: applying pressure on the enemy while maintaining the positional front or conducting operations intended to restore maneuver to the battlefield.[5] Svechin also posits that negative objectives can contribute to a strategic defense, which he argues requires a balance between defending against enemy attacks and conserving resources.[6]

Pursuing negative objectives increases the likelihood that war will take on a positional form. Positional warfare becomes near certain if both sides pursue negative goals.[7] Coalitional war also increases the likelihood of a positional front, as coalition members may individually pursue negative goals in an effort to conserve their own resources and combat capabilities for other aims, such as a later offensive effort or to compel the combatants to negotiate peace.[8]

The "illusion" that one is preparing for an offensive effort rather than conducting a defensive operation can feed positional warfare.[9] A commander can be unwilling to concede that he must remain on the defensive in certain areas and will instead insist that he is preparing to resume offensive operations along the line. This thinking hinders the conservation of resources on axes that will in reality remain defensive, weakening the concentration of resources for the true offensive operations that are necessary to restore maneuver.

Missing capabilities and the inability to pursue positive goals can additionally contribute to a positional front. Material shortages on one or more sides of the conflict may cause combatants to exhaust their offensive capabilities and enter positional fighting.[10] *Strategy* contains historical examples and multiple causes of material shortages on both sides of a conflict, including inadequate pre-war preparation,

poor logistics across challenging terrain features, the exhaustion of manpower and offensive potential, and attempting a sea landing using a force with restricted mobility.[11] Shifts to positional warfare are sometimes temporary while the force groupings rest and reconstitute.

Technological development, particularly technological parity, can also promote the development of positional fronts.

Technological development, particularly technological parity, can also promote the development of positional fronts. Svechin argues that modern technologies, primarily rail and modern communications, made positional fronts in the First World War likely.[12] Rail lines ensured that large masses of forces on the defensive could move faster and farther than attackers advancing on foot, making it easier for military commands to create and maintain defensive fronts capable of defending against enemy breakthroughs and preventing enemy maneuver than it was for the attacking troops to exploit penetrations.[13] Svechin notes that the railroad had an "equalizing" effect on both sides of the battlefield.[14] He adds that parity in communications technology also contributed to this equalizing effect, as early 20th-century communication technologies favor static positions by requiring fixed lines for telephonic communications.

Svechin believes that the geographic features of a theater can make positional warfare less likely. Smaller countries lacking strategic depth and extensive rear areas are unable to generate the resources necessary to sustain a positional front for an extended period.[15] Svechin argues that this was the case for post-Versailles Germany, writing before the Second World War that the treaty had redrawn Germany's borders in such a way that made positional warfare impossible and made it "physically necessary" for Germany to instead prepare for offensive operations.[16] A defense requires expendable territory and time, and larger countries can afford to lose hundreds to thousands of square kilometers temporarily whereas smaller countries will depend on external assistance for defense.[17] Generating the required mass to prevent a breakthrough and pursue positive goals becomes easier when a combatant possesses the requisite industrial depth and rear areas to support its war effort.[18]

Capabilities, objectives, geography, and general technology thus determine the onset of positional warfare. External factors can be key; even if a combatant sets out to maintain maneuver throughout the conflict, exogenous conditions and unfavorable decisions may result in positional fighting regardless.

Characteristics of Positional Warfare

Positional warfare is characterized by localized engagements and attritional battles, which can generate tactical and strategic effects in positional warfare even in the context of relatively static front lines.[19] Forces fighting on positional fronts use fortifications and mass to prevent the enemy from achieving positive goals, and Svechin describes each combatant as trying to "lean" on the front of the enemy.[20] The presence of static lines and the absence of maneuver are essential elements of Svechin's conception of positional warfare. Static lines do not mean that combat itself is not dynamic, nor that combatants cannot achieve advantage or initiative through this combat.

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Local battles are tactical engagements aimed at disrupting the "positional" calm from which the enemy may otherwise benefit. These efforts can include night raids and sniper fire, which make it more difficult for the enemy to operate successfully in forward defensive lines.[21] Svechin argues that these efforts can inflict significant casualties on

the enemy and force the enemy to increase the force density across the front.[22]

The local battles of positional warfare cannot individually achieve operational or strategic effects. Combatants instead pursue strategic objectives on a positional front through a series of what *Strategy* calls material battles. This material battle is the most likely outcome of any operational-level offensive effort that either does not aim or tries and fails to restore maneuver to a positional front.[23]

Combatants pursued strategic objectives on a positional front through a series of what Strategy calls material battles.

A combatant seeks to defeat an enemy in material battle by fixing and destroying their forces rather than by making territorial advances. A material battle is the aggregation of localized battles that have grown in scope and aim to maximize enemy casualties while minimizing one's own casualties.[24] Material battle seeks to force the enemy to expend reserves and resources in an unfavorable exchange by tying the enemy down to an operational or strategic asset, such as a logistics hub, industrial center, port city, or other object with informational or cultural value.[25] A combatant conducting material battle destroys enemy forces through favorable relative attrition rather than through maneuver warfare. A combatant may choose to wage material battles for months and prioritize inflicting greater losses on the enemy than their own losses over defeating the enemy through territorial advance.[26]

A combatant conducting material battle destroys enemy forces through favorable relative attrition rather than through maneuver warfare.

A positional front requires less personnel and materiel to maintain than would be necessary for extensive maneuver operations, a condition that can allow a combatant to create operational or strategic reserves to break the positional front later. Svechin notes that a combatant can reduce the forces dedicated to the front line to the minimum required to maintain defense and create a reserve from the excess.[27] The military command may also withdraw forces from certain areas of the front and create reserves from the withdrawn units.[28] Svechin's historical example of the creation of a Soviet strategic reserve in the First World War serves as a warning, however, as Soviet commanders would conserve their battle-ready formations by deploying them to positional fronts, leaving mediocre units subordinated to the high military command to conduct combat operations.[29] Svechin notes that the material battle explicitly seeks to deny the enemy the opportunity to develop an operational or strategic reserve while enabling friendly forces to create their own reserve.

Positional warfare can encourage a combatant to increasingly centralize their high military command and reorganize their force groupings to best attrit the enemy. Svechin argues that positional warfare allows the high military command to make operational-level decisions because the reduced tempo of operations allows time for information to reach the high command and orders to reach the front without the battlefield conditions changing significantly.[30] Decisions from an overcentralized high military command will likely come too late for the rapid pace of maneuver warfare, but the reduced tempo of positional warfare allows the high command to bypass and even undermine frontline commanders should the high command choose to do so. An "illusion-free and intelligent" high military command can master the anarchy resulting from the over centralization of command, arraying its forces to compel the enemy to deploy across the theater at a disadvantage.[31] Svechin also argues that the military command needs to downsize military entities such as transport units that grow "idle" during positional warfare, if only temporarily, and that positional warfare requires additional formations to man

the front line despite the reduction in the necessary number of personnel.[32] All these changes undermine the military's ability to resume maneuver warfare and can create a long-term commitment to positional warfare intentionally or unintentionally.

Positional warfare makes secondary sectors of the front more important than they are during maneuver warfare. Svechin warns that military commanders tend to overestimate the value of certain sectors on a positional front, however.[33] A combatant tends to focus on the geographical value of a certain area because of its logistics or topographical features since the differences between different sectors are otherwise diminished compared to periods of maneuver warfare.[34] These features — such as an industrial center, critical road junction, or rail line — "compel" a combatant to protect these sectors of the front more than other sectors. Svechin notes how the English Channel became the most important sector of the positional front between France and Belgium in 1914 due to the importance to Germany of the ability to conduct an operational-strategic blockade to prevent the United Kingdom from securing the northern coast of France.[35]

Positional warfare makes secondary sectors of the front more important than they are during maneuver warfare.

Svechin argues that a combatant can restore battlefield maneuver by breaking through the positional front or by changing the terms of the engagement.

Breaking out of positional warfare

Svechin observes that combatants may wish to avoid engaging in material battle due to its costly nature, especially for combatants defending against an enemy's material battle operations. The alternative to remaining in positional warfare is restoring maneuver to the battlefield. Svechin argues that a combatant can restore battlefield maneuver by breaking through the positional front or by changing the terms of the engagement.

A combatant can exploit physical and political geography to help restore maneuver. For example, withdrawing to more favorable ground invites the opponent to enter less defensible terrain where maneuver is easier to achieve, and positional fronts are harder to stabilize.[36] A combatant may also disrupt positional fronts by utilizing terrain that previously was not part of the battlefield. This terrain may include ground belonging to a previously neutral state or topography outside the conflict's scope.

A combatant in a positional war must avoid falling into the trap of overcentralizing their command to the point that the combatant cannot appropriately respond to an enemy breaking through his defensive lines. A knowledgeable military command aware of positional warfare's tendency to favor an overcentralized command can plan for these different requirements and balance appropriately depending on the command's objectives, the enemy's objectives, and the current state of the battlefield. The tendency to overcentralize the military command during positional warfare and the fact that positional fronts require static logistics capabilities can allow a successful breakthrough to disrupt the enemy combatant's command system, which can create operational effects. A combatant that has achieved a breakthrough may easily wreck the enemy's command and control structure and logistics organization if the enemy has overcentralized the military command and restricted logistics infrastructure to optimize excessively for positional warfare.

Positional fronts also favor strategic undertakings by a combatant with interior lines. A combatant who takes advantage of a positional front to create

a strategic reserve can later use this strategic reserve to break through enemy lines and return maneuver to the battlefield.[37] Positional fronts may create the opportunity for certain combatants to fix large amounts of the enemy's forces using a smaller force, allowing the combatant to use freed-up troops to achieve operational successes elsewhere.

Svechin emphasizes the need for comprehensive modifications across all levels of a force's structure to take advantage of these possibilities. This approach applies to frontline tactics, logistics, and command and control.[38] The military command must align the tactical training of its forces with the command's strategic goals to restore maneuver.

Svechin places a significant emphasis on surprise, arguing that surprise is crucial to achieving success within positional warfare and restoring maneuver to the battlefield. Svechin contends that the most important characteristic of the German army's methods at the end of the First World War was to restore surprise to the battlefield.[39] Svechin does not specifically note whether this surprise occurs at the strategic, operational, or tactical level, but tactical and operational surprise are likely necessary for a combatant seeking to break through enemy defenses and restore maneuver to the battlefield.

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Conclusion

Positional warfare, as conceptualized in Alexander Svechin's *Strategy*, is a phase of warfare that, while geographically static, creates dynamic opportunities and risks. This conception is incongruent with the modern connotations of strategic paralysis that the concepts "positional warfare" and "static front" can evoke. Local battles on a positional front can be key to shaping later operational success, and the attritional material battle can achieve strategic effects and allow a combatant to seize the battlefield advantage without breaking a positional front.

Svechin believes that success in the positional phase can set conditions for the restoration of maneuver, which may be as important as the opportunities for the tactical and strategic impacts within positional warfare. Positional fronts create favorable conditions for the combatant with interior lines and for those willing to exploit physical and political geography to circumvent existing lines. The centralized command and control that benefits positional fighting can increase the likelihood of the operational and strategic success of an initial breakthrough for a well-prepared and organized combatant.

Both foreseen and unforeseen factors contribute to the development of a positional front in the war, but a positional front is not necessarily permanent or static despite its difficulties. Svechin notes that "it is easy to get involved in positional warfare, even against one's will, but it is not so easy to get out of it."[40] This fact has given positional warfare a reputation of extreme difficulty and permanence; as Svechin's contemporary, Gregor Isserson, states in his *Evolution of Operational Art*, "positional forms of combat are scary and repugnant. People recoil from them as if they were a kind of military plague."[41] A positional front imposes obligations on and presents opportunities to a combatant seeking to achieve an advantage on the battlefield. Positional warfare is a form of combat with various dangers and opportunities in which forces require specific means for success.

Svechin's arguments in *Strategy* add nuance and depth to the concept of positional warfare, particularly for contemporary Western military thinkers, acting as a reminder that positional warfare can be broken, allowing a combatant to resume maneuver warfare and achieve significant operational successes.

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Endnotes

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