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Western Ideas of War and the Russia-Ukraine Conflict

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As noted in its Introduction, my book, *War: A Genealogy of Western Ideas and Practices*, “is mainly about ‘Western’ ideas about war, but also about Western practices.” It was in print when Russia launched its all-out invasion of Ukraine. This gives me the opportunity to reflect on whether I would have changed anything in my text, had I completed it after 24 February 2022. Well, I would have added a few words about current Russian thinking. I think I have rightly said, in my conclusions, that the current Russian regime’s thinking about war and peace is not binary (p. 399), but I might have added: Putin sees all of international politics as war, war in kinetic and non-kinetic forms. Even when he was still ready to co-operate to some extent with the West, he uttered the following words in a speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2020:

We all know that competition and rivalry between countries in world history never stopped, does not stop, and will never stop. Differences and a clash of interests are also natural for such a complicated body as human civilisation.¹

These words would have come as no surprise to any “Realist” politician, confirming the “Realist” theories of International Relations. Which leads me to the old debate about whether Russia is part of Europe or of “the East” or something separate, in between, a debate mainly carried on among Russians. Looking at Russian pronouncements on war and peace and on International Relations since the 19th century, however, what strikes me is how *similar* the



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arguments made by Russian strategists have been to arguments made by strategists in the West. As in the West, there were the “Realists” proclaiming that war was unavoidable, that all life was war, who in Germany gradually slipped down the slope towards Darwinism and racism. We find these in the writing of the founding father of Russian strategic thought, Ghenrik (Henry) Leer, a contemporary of Moltke the Elder’s, among the Russian exiles of the 1950s, like Evgeny Eduardovich Messner, and among contemporary Russian military thinkers such as Major General Alexander Vladimirov.² They don’t seem so different from German authors of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, or from Italy’s Giulio Douhet, or from Britain’s C.E. Callwell or J.F.C. Fuller, or from France’s Raoul Castex, all military men, or Germany’s lawyer Carl Schmitt with his weaselly words that managed to get him acquitted of the worst accusations of having contributed to the preparation of the Second World War. Either way, Russian military discourse was well prepared for the Marxist teaching that forecast an inevitable struggle between capitalism/imperialism on the one hand and socialism on the other, for the eventual and inevitable triumph of socialism/communism. The ground was well prepared for the reception of the saying variously attributed to Lenin and Stalin and several Soviet military leaders that politics (i.e., international relations) is the continuation of war by other means. *Si non e vero, e ben trovato*.³ It certainly captures Putin’s views nicely.

Yet even among these Russian “Realists,” Leer defined the aim of strategy as being “to define a reasonable goal and direct all forces and means towards its achievement in the shortest time and *with the least sacrifices*,” which stands in contrast with the way Soviet soldiers were employed in the two world wars.⁴ And alongside these Russian military thinkers, there were the most humane international lawyers in the employ of successive Tsars, who did so much to promote agreements on the limitations of war in the successive conferences of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Most widely known among them is Friedrich Martens, Russian representative at the Hague Conference of 1899 who introduced the eponymous clause into the Hague Convention on the Laws and Customs of War on Land, designed to close off loopholes for the inhumane use of military force.

Think also of Tolstoy on the extreme end of the spectrum, one of the key thinkers of European pacifism. And think of the painter Vasily Vereshchagin, whose critical painting “The Apotheosis of War” I chose for a cover of my book. It shows a huge pile of skulls against the barren widths of Central Asia into which Russian imperial expansion reached in the mid-19th century. When paintings of Vereshchagin were exhibited in St Petersburg in 1884, the organisers chose to exclude this painting for reasons that in the German Third Reich would have been called *Wehrkraftszersetzung*, the undermining of the fighting spirit (an accusation the Germans would punish with the death penalty during the Second World War).

Even for the value debates about the importance of individual freedoms vs. the society as a whole, Russians never had to look to the East: the Nazi slogan “you are nothing, your people are everything”⁵ could just as easily have been coined by a totalitarian *Communist* regime.



Today, its spirit may be more common in Asian societies, but its roots lie in what J.L. Talmon called “totalitarian democracy,” invented to the West, not to the East of Russia.⁶

In short, the two main schools of thought about war that we find in the “West” – those subscribing to the view that war is an eternal part of the human condition, and those who have sought to limit or even abolish it – have also been present in Russia since the 19th century. Only, today those who are heirs to the humanitarian tradition, who believe in the good to be derived from peaceful exchange, the renunciation of war as a tool of statecraft and respect for the equal rights of other populations and their states, are either behind bars, or in exile, or lie low for the sake of their families, in the hope that the storm will pass. They may be a minority in the unthinking mass of Russian citizens who have been brainwashed for years by Russian state-controlled media. Even there, the Russian masses are not atypical of Europe: in several of the oldest and most resilient of democracies, we have recently had ample proof of uncritical thinking and vulnerability to demagoguery.

Other than that, the Russian invasion of Ukraine underscores the reality and enduring relevance of several of the themes of my book. It illustrates the continuing practice of siege warfare, and the way in which the populations of besieged cities become the main enemies if they try to hold out and refuse to surrender. Reports of mass rapes⁷ – something Russian soldiers were infamous for in the Second World War (p. 373) – have accompanied the anecdotal stories of cold-blooded shooting of small families who were trying to make their way out of the cities, or of the shelling of buses full of people seeking to escape the artillery fire on their cities who had been promised free passage.⁸ Also, we have had reports of population transfers: the abduction of the entire populations of villages, or the promise of free passage on condition that townsfolk from beleaguered cities let themselves be taken to Russia, again standing in a very old Russian and even Byzantine tradition (p. 362f.). We have had reports of the destruction of grain depots,⁹ reminiscent of scorched earth tactics of old (p. 21, 41, 363f., 386), and of course the Russian destruction or blockade of Ukrainian ports has as a result that Ukrainian grain cannot reach its normal consumers in countries as far away as India or Egypt. These reports are not yet independently verifiable or confirmed, and it cannot at this stage be ruled out that they are exaggerated by Ukrainian reporting. But if they are true, they come in a long tradition of the Russian way of war. In any case, my book underscores the effects of war on civilians in particular, and the ongoing war in Ukraine provides ample examples.

Putin’s war also serves as ample confirmation that ideas matter, and that world views vary. His amazingly constructed reasons for going to war, as presented to his own population, would have been another example for the section on “Colourful Pretexts” that concludes my chapter on “Professed Reasons for Going to War” (pp. 213-216). It is a perfect example of a binary, and at the same time reductionist world view, in which all that is evil is thrown into one pot (here: anybody who does not want to subordinate himself to Putin is defined as Fascist, Nazi) and all that is good in the other (Russia, Russian-speakers, the Orthodox Church, the heroic Russian



sacrifices of the Second World War in the fight against Nazism). Thus, Russian neo-imperialism, Russian irredentism, Russian attempts to turn back the wheel of time and to re-occupy its one-time colony Ukraine is redefined in terms of a heroic rerun of the Second World War. It is a perfect example of how a past war is used as a template to justify one in the present,¹⁰ and of how important war manifestos – public justifications of going to war – are (pp. 199-203) in getting one's narrative out, ideally first. Target audiences are not only one's own population, but also the many other groups around the world who in their scepticism about the USA and the West in general, about globalisation, about liberal challenges to traditional lifestyles are willing to believe Putin.

The war furnishes evidence of the non-linearity and the non-universality of the spread of norms of international law. Putin is going back in history, abandoning the *acquis*¹¹ which many of us had taken for granted in the West. Where even the Communist chiefs of the Kremlin had signed up to the renunciation of straight-forward aggression as a tool of statecraft in the UN Charter – its various invasions of Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Afghanistan were masked as responses to calls for help from the regimes in power – Putin contrived no such excuse. Already with the annexation of Crimea and the covert war in Donbas since 2014, he departed from the commitment to restraint which his Soviet predecessors had made in 1975 with the Helsinki Final Act – the promise not to change international borders by force – and the Budapest Memorandum of 1994 on the recognition of the borders of Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan in particular, in exchange for their relinquishment of Soviet nuclear weapons still based on their soil. It casts aside the Russia-Ukraine Interstate Treaty of 1997 and Black Sea Fleet agreements of the same year, the 2003 Treaty of Cooperation on the Azov Sea and Kerch Strait, and the Kharkiv Agreements of 2010 signed by then-Presidents Yanukovich for Ukraine and Medvedev for Russia.¹² Thus, while international law has over the last two centuries progressed consistently in its struggle to contain and later outlaw war, this linear development does not apply throughout the world, nor are commitments to treaties once signed upheld globally (p. 413).

The Russo-Ukrainian War illustrates how thoroughly the nuclear revolution has changed the world (see p. 53f): where in 1939, France and Britain gave a security guarantee to Poland when the danger took shape that Germany would invade it, the NATO countries dared do no such thing in the winter of 2021/2022 when signs increasingly pointed to an imminent Russian invasion of Ukraine. Would the memory of the horrors of the Second World War alone have sufficed to stop NATO from engaging in 2022? Would the cost to rich and selfish Western countries alone stop us from stepping up our aid and sanctions (see my argument on the cost of upholding the rules-based international order, p.192)? Perhaps, but at any rate, the looming nuclear dimension is the dominant factor keeping Western countries from lending Ukraine more comprehensive support.



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A medieval mind would have seen the cause of all this evil in the disposition of an individual “prince” or leader (see p. 135), and one cannot but agree that the Russo-Ukrainian War seems in a particularly poignant way to point to the responsibility of a single, exalted, powerful individual: Vladimir Putin. He has been keen to cast himself as a new tsar, but tyrant would be a better expression for somebody who sends out his agents to assassinate journalists and defectors, and arrest protesters, even those standing in the street holding empty billboards or with empty hands. Prophetically, Vereshchagin dedicated his aforementioned painting “to all great conquerors, past, present and to come.”¹³ Only, Putin would probably see this as an honourable epithet, as did the princes of previous centuries. Again, the non-linearity of human history is amply proven.

I should not, however, conclude this commentary on the Russo-Ukrainian War in the light of my *Genealogy of Western Ideas and Practices* of war without pointing out that this surprisingly old-fashioned war of invasion by one state of another also contains features that point to the different shape of wars to come. To mention two: the role of one outstandingly rich individual, Elon Musk, who furnishes Ukraine with intelligence from his satellites,¹⁴ or the international crowdsourcing of the purchase and adaptation of drones furnished to the Ukrainian armed forces.¹⁵ As Dr. Max McKeown pointed out to me, this is in principle similar to rich American individuals or groups funding the IRA during the “Troubles” (late 1960s to 1998), the real-time intelligence that is made available in this way is technologically on a much higher scale, as is the intensity of the armed conflict. It also illustrates the once-again growing importance of non-state actors, never completely absent (think of the role of individual companies from the British East India Company of the 18th and 19th centuries to the role of Rio Tinto in the Second World War). It questions our traditional conceptualisation of war as being mainly if not exclusively the matter of states, a definition that goes back to European Antiquity as states sought to outlaw other forms of war by insisting only they had the legitimate authority to prosecute it, but never quite managed to. This narrow definition blinkers us conceptually if we want to understand the many dimensions of war. Other Russian-backed armed conflicts have involved private military companies, volunteers fighting without state insignia as in Donbas since 2014, and proxies. Moreover, looking further afield, conflicts of recent decades have seen the involvement of politically and/or religiously-motivated non-state groups (think of Al Qaeda) and criminal networks and organisations (think of the opium cultivation and illegal exports from Afghanistan). My prediction is that such patterns that are not found in the Russo-Ukraine War will in the future be of growing importance. It is also, that Western democracies will struggle to uphold the Laws of Armed Conflict (International Humanitarian Law) as they will find themselves increasingly in the minority in a world where other cultures set less store by human rights and the value of the life of the individual.



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¹ “Russian President Putin’s Speech At The World Economic Forum: Complete English Translation,” January 28, 2021, available at <https://www.russia-briefing.com/news/russian-president-putin-s-speech-at-the-world-economic-forum-complete-english-translation.html/>, accessed on June 26, 2022.

² All examples from Ofer Fridman (ed. & trs.): *Strategiya: The Foundations of the Russian Art of Strategy* (London: Hurst, 2021).

³ If it is not true, it is still well put.

⁴ Ibid., p. 7.

⁵ “Du bist nichts, dein Volk ist alles.”

⁶ J.L.Talmon: *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1952).

⁷ Gaby Hinsliff: “Russia’s mass rapes in Ukraine are a war crime,” *The Guardian*, April 15, 2022, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/apr/15/rape-weapon-ukraine-war-crime-sexual-violence>.

⁸ Pavel Polityuk: “Ukrainian officials say Russian firing hampers rescue of Mariupol civilians”, *Reuters/Leaderpost*, May 6, 2022, available at <https://leaderpost.com/pmn/business-pmn/ukrainian-officials-say-russian-firing-hampers-rescue-of-mariupol-civilians-2/wcm/e21c5340-259c-499f-a044-dac44cd57224/amp/>, accessed on June 28, 2022.

⁹ Jake Epstein: “Russia Is Targeting Grain Storage to Cause Famine, Ukraine Alleges,” *Business Insider*, May 2, 2022, available at <https://www.businessinsider.com/russian-forces-targeting-grain-storage-to-cause-famine-ukraine-alleges-2022-5>, accessed on June 28, 2022.

¹⁰ For further examples, see Beatrice Heuser & Athena Leoussi (eds): *Famous Battles and How they Shaped the Modern World* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2018), 2 volumes.

¹¹ The body of legislation and other norms that has been agreed over time, a word that made its way into British English via the European Union’s gradual building of a body of norms but will now likely be forgotten again after Brexit...

¹² James Sherr: “Myth No. 1: ‘Russia and the West are as “bad” as each other.’,” in Duncan Allan et al: *Myths and misconceptions in the debate on Russia*, Russia and Eurasia Programme Report (London: Chatham House, May 2021), p. 21.

¹³ Tretjakov Gallery, Moscow.

¹⁴ Christopher Miller, Mark Scott and Bryan Bender: “UkraineX: How Elon Musk’s space satellites changed the war on the ground,” *Politico*, June 9, 2022, available at <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/06/09/elon-musk-spacex-starlink-ukraine-00038039>, accessed on June 29, 2022.

¹⁵ James Marson and Ian Lovett: “The Crowdsourcing Effort to Get Body Armor, Drones and Helmets to Ukraine,” *The Wall Street Journal* (March 27, 2022), available at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-crowdsourcing-effort-to-getbody-armor-drones-and-helmetsto-ukraine-11648385356>, accessed on June 29, 2022.

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