

Preface: what is at stake

This book examines Russia's 'way in war'. It explores recent Russian strategic history, reflecting on what 'war' means to Moscow, and how the Russian leadership has sought to shape strategy and use its military power over the last century, in order to interpret current developments and look to the future. In so doing, I look at persistent themes in Russian war fighting to explore continuity and change in Moscow's doctrine and strategy; in other words: how the Russian state and armed forces understand the evolving science and art of war in theory and practice.

The book offers a pocket history, framing the main thinkers and themes, priorities and problems of the Russian 'way in war' to offer some structure and context for thinking about how the Russian armed forces will evolve through the remainder of the 2020s. What are the 'ingredients' for which Euro-Atlantic officials and observers should be looking to interpret the Russian 'way in war'? What are the key strategic and military questions and dilemmas for the Russian leadership? What do 'victory' and 'defeat' look like? If we can distinguish a 'way in war' at the state level, what does this mean for how the Russian armed forces view the evolving 'art of war'?

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In the West, many talk of Russia's renewed assault on Ukraine in 2022 – often described as a 'blitzkrieg' – as a turning point in international affairs. Accustomed over a generation to seeing war through the lenses of counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency, characterised by precision strikes and limited combat far from home, and in terms of war's 'hybridity' emphasising 'non-kinetic' force, the shock was such that many consider Moscow's assault to mark a challenge equivalent to the world wars of the twentieth century. For some, therefore, the situation echoes the late 1930s, and the start of a new 'pre-war' era.¹

Indeed, the very *scale* of the fighting in Ukraine since early 2022 has surprised and shocked Western policy makers and public alike. The attack has resulted in an industrial war between two of the largest armed forces in Europe, a clash of steel and firepower, with all the attendant death, destruction and socio-economic dislocation. On the front lines, the grinding nature of the fighting echoes the wars of the twentieth century: extensive trench networks, dense minefields and thousands of wrecked military vehicles litter Ukraine's countryside. Artillery fires thousands, often tens of thousands of shells daily, inflicting appalling loss of life and limb, and condemning many to psychological trauma. The war is felt behind the lines, too, with critical infrastructure damaged or destroyed; the socio-economic effects of blockades and sanctions are felt at home and in global energy and grain markets. Millions have become refugees; Russia stands accused of grave war crimes.²

For their part, senior Russian politicians, officers and observers appear to offer an ambiguous – not to say confused and confusing – perspective. On one hand, they describe the campaign as a 'special war operation' (*spetsalnaya voennaya operatsiya*, SVO),

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a more limited effort. But on the other, they also suggest that Russia faces a ‘Fatherland War’-type, existential struggle. The combat may (currently) be between Ukraine and Russia, but as Russian officials see it, the contest with (and challenge to Russia posed by) the Euro-Atlantic community is often described in global, even epochal terms. References to the Great Fatherland War, as the Eastern Front in World War II is known in Russia, permeate speeches and documents. Indeed, Putin even indicated that the Russian assault was intended to pre-empt a repeat of Operation Barbarossa, launched by Nazi Germany against the Soviet Union in 1941.³

So, a great deal is at stake. As the United Kingdom’s then Chief of General Staff (CGS) Patrick Sanders noted in 2022, it would be ‘dangerous to assume that Ukraine is a limited conflict’.⁴ Moreover, if the actual combat has remained between Russia and Ukraine, and very largely on the territories of these two states, each side receives considerable support that lends a wider regional, even global aspect to the war that extends well beyond the Euro-Atlantic region to Iran, India, North Korea and China.

The high stakes involved are clear, particularly in the potential for the war to escalate. Moments of potential crisis, such as when missiles have fallen on the territory of a North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) member state causing casualties, illustrate the inherent tensions and widespread concerns that NATO could be drawn into the war. This remains a central question as the Euro-Atlantic community debates the implications of providing Kyiv with more powerful and longer-range weaponry, and whether Moscow’s threatened responses are real or a bluff: whether Putin might resort to deploying nuclear weapons features repeatedly in the headlines.

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Furthermore, if there is widespread consensus that the war between Russia and Ukraine will be a long one, the Euro-Atlantic community is preparing for a sustained Russian challenge to European security as a whole, even a possible wider war. Sanders, for instance, suggested that even if Russia's conventional military capacity is reduced, 'respite' will be temporary and the threat will become 'more acute': 'in most scenarios, Russia will be an even greater threat to European security after Ukraine than it was before'.⁵ Not only is this an existential challenge for Ukraine, but the Euro-Atlantic community's relationship with Russia, already long dissonant and competitive, is now one of strategic contest, explicitly spoken of in adversarial terms. If some refer to a 'new Cold War', others talk of the dangers of World War III, or a new epoch of wars. Scenarios have begun to envisage what a war with Russia might look like, even when it might erupt.⁶

So, Russia poses both an acute and a longer-term challenge: accurately framing this is essential to shaping effective policy. This may appear so obvious as to hardly need saying. Indeed, for many, today's Russia is obviously a revanchist, imperialist expansionist power, willing to use extensive and blunt, brute military force to achieve its goals. The main question is where Moscow will attack next.

Yet some care is warranted: post-Cold War Western analysis of Russian power has yielded only mixed results, either in terms of foreseeing the outbreak and evolution of wars, or what might oblige Moscow to desist or agree to terms. When Moscow annexed Crimea, for instance, it was such a surprise that a senior NATO official called it 'the most amazing information blitzkrieg ever seen'.⁷

Throughout the 2010s, officials and observers persistently misinterpreted Russian theory and practice through a blend of

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wishful thinking, soundbites and buzzwords. A handful of honourable exceptions apart, analysis of Russian capabilities was often divorced from analysis of Moscow's intent, in turn becoming separated from Russian war history and culture, and from Russian doctrine and strategy. Attention focused on the new forms of war supposedly being invented by the Russian military to counter and avoid Western conventional superiority, and suggested that Moscow's definition and understanding of war had changed such that it was shaping a new art of war. Comment and analysis – and much policy – focused primarily on Russia's attempts to develop a 'hybrid' approach to war, even how its military no longer prioritised firepower or battle. A narrative of 'little green men' and 'ambiguity' took hold in the wake of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and continued even as Moscow built up its armed forces around Ukraine in 2021 and early 2022.⁸

Consequently, much of the discussion about Russian war strategy and military power began from the wrong premises, conflating grand strategy and military strategy, and so posed the wrong questions. The result was not just a lack of clarity about what causes Moscow to go to war, but even confusion over what 'war' means to Moscow. Essential features were missed, and outsized roles allocated to particular individuals and organisations, with others unnoticed or discounted. The practicalities of life in the Russian armed forces were ignored, from the capacity of the defence industry to conscription and conditions of service, such as health, military discipline and the culture of command. Likewise, critical aspects of how the armed forces worked were overlooked: if the air force and navy barely featured in analysis, the practicalities of how and why Moscow rehearsed its mobilisation and sought to reform its military logistics remained arcane.

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To be sure, this changed once the renewed assault began: attention shifted to the battlefield and Moscow's blunt use of firepower. Officials and observers began to shine the spotlight on tactical failures and shortcomings in interoperability, the chain of command and leadership, and logistics. A sense emerged, therefore, that unwarranted hyperbole about the Russian security and defence challenge during the 2010s had turned into seeing Moscow's armed forces as impotent. One senior Western officer said that 'whereas before the assault we may have seen them as 10 feet tall, we now run the risk of seeing them as 3 feet tall'.⁹ As planners and observers watch for change in Russian approaches and new theories of victory, and estimate how Russia's forces will be regenerated, there is a risk that the wrong lessons will be drawn about the Russian 'art of war' and what this actually means.

Certainly, we have a great deal of information, from satellite imagery to social media: some fine investigative journalism and open source analysis offers granular detail on a range of specific questions pertaining to how Moscow has waged this campaign. Yet many of the same analytical problems remain. Half-truths, more general imprecisions and specific inaccuracies about Moscow's approach to war are already being laundered – with plenty of speculation – into mainstream analysis as fact; the emergence of a new range of buzzwords and half-digested references to individual Russian theorists is only a matter of time. These are evident in the discussions about even vitally important questions such as whether Moscow is actually already 'at war', whether the economy is 'mobilised' – even what 'mobilisation' means – and the likelihood of whether Moscow will resort to nuclear weapons. Consequently, estimating what the Russian state and military leadership is doing and what it

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intends to do – and will be able to do – too often becomes a matter of surmise and conjecture, a high-stakes version of blind man’s bluff.

Given the structural contest between Moscow and the Euro-Atlantic community, and concerns about miscalculation and escalation, we cannot afford to jump to the wrong conclusions about Russia’s way in war again. The adages about knowing one’s adversary and establishing the kind of war on which one is embarking, not mistaking it for nor trying to turn it into something alien to its nature, may be well-worn, but they remain essential guidelines.