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Russia's thinking on new wars and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine

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ABSTRACT

Russia's poor military performance in the early stages of the full-scale war in Ukraine (2022-) has been attributed to various causes. This article considers possible intellectual causes of Russia's poor performance. Reviewing public Russian military and security discussions on new wars in the years prior to Russia's full-scale invasion, it argues that Russian operational planning on Ukraine aligned with key assumptions about new wars. In particular, the Russian leadership's failure to acknowledge Ukrainian agency, its misguided emphasis on non-kinetic means and its mistaken assumption that Western states would be unwilling to respond forcefully to Russian aggression followed key tenets of Russian new war thinking. The article raises questions about the relationship between Russian military theorizing and Russian military action, and how a prevailing intellectual paradigm shaped Russian perceptions about the reasonability of the invasion plan.

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1. Introduction

Russia's military performed poorly in the early stages of the war in Ukraine (2022). It ratcheted up high losses and made few territorial gains, falling far short of its stated aim to capture Kyiv and topple Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's government. It failed to effectively coordinate its air and ground forces.¹ It made itself vulnerable to Ukrainian counterattacks. It ran into a logistical quagmire that left many of its troops unable to refuel machinery or secure food.² It lacked accurate and up-to-date intelligence. Problems of morale were rampant – desertions and refusals to fight compounded Russia's manpower problems that were large even at the outset of the invasion.³ Russian military equipment, from communications technology to tank armor, underperformed, corroded by endemic corruption in Russia's military establishment.⁴ By November 2022, Russia had lost around 60% of the territory it had seized in Ukraine, including the region north of Kyiv, the city of Kherson and nearly all of Kharkiv Province.⁵ To match the reality of its performance, Russia's political leadership scaled down its expressed operational aims. Now, it claimed to concentrate on seizing the small

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region of Donbas, having sought to bring down the government in Kyiv in February 2022.

Russia's lack of military achievements in Ukraine drew foreign derision and scorn. Its performance was described as "lacklustre,"⁶ a "debacle,"⁷ a "failure,"⁸ a "collapse,"⁹ and as proof that Russia's much lauded military reforms, implemented at a great price since 2008, had failed.¹⁰ Two Western experts called Russia's forces in Ukraine a "Potemkin army."¹¹ Other observers said Russia in Ukraine squandered its best units – airborne and *spetsnaz* –¹² along with its reputation as a great military power.¹³ To be sure, the sleek, high-impact, widely vaunted, scalpel-like fighting force of the 2014 Crimean campaign was nowhere to be seen.

The explanations for Russia's travails in Ukraine in the early stages of the war have been many. Commentators have pointed to weak logistics,¹⁴ lack of manpower,¹⁵ a disjointed command,¹⁶ poor morale,¹⁷ flawed intelligence (particularly as provided by Russia's foreign intelligence service the FSB)¹⁸ and widespread corruption,¹⁹ which apparently rendered Russia's Armed Forces a very different beast in practice from on paper.

Yet many of Russia's initial setbacks may be traced to a single source: its quixotic operational plan. This plan, unmoored in realistic assessments of the political and social situation in Ukraine, assumed that Ukrainian resistance would fold,²⁰ that critical elements of the Ukrainian state would turn²¹ and that the civilian population would be cowed into submission or perhaps in places even welcome Russian occupation.²² It calculated that Moscow could prevail with only limited troops over Ukraine's armed forces which had swollen in size and become battle-hardened through the Donbas War (2014-). And whilst it correctly foresaw that the West would impose retaliatory sanctions, it did not anticipate economic warfare on the scale that came to pass, with a slew of private businesses pulling out their operations from Russia in support of unprecedented sanctions imposed by Western governments.²³ Rather, the Kremlin appears to have been guided by a belief that the main phase of the "special military operation" would be done and dusted in a matter of days²⁴ and that the West would grudgingly accept a fait accompli.

The present article argues that if Moscow's operational plan proved wildly unrealistic, it was also in keeping with prominent Russian ideas about new war. Specifically, it adhered to a line of thinking that had been growing in importance in Russian military and security circles in the years prior to the full-scale invasion. This thinking had been expounded by Russian military and security researchers, propagated in Russia's premiere military journals and publicly espoused by top Russian military officers. It emphasized the effectiveness of non-kinetic measures, long-range precision strikes and limited elite force deployment, whilst downplaying the likelihood of large-scale conventional (and, for that matter, nuclear) war. Russia's chief of the general staff, Valery Gerasimov, in a widely cited speech in 2013, for example, suggested that nonviolent means could be as destructive as conventional ones.²⁵ According to Gerasimov, non-violent means and long-range attacks were more likely components of future warfare than conventional ground operations.

In exploring the influence of Russian thinking on new war on Russian warfare in Ukraine, the article is divided into four parts. First, it opens with a review of previous research on Russian thinking about new war. Second, it explores discussions about new war in Russian military publications and official statements since 2012 (which

marked the beginning of Vladimir Putin's second spell as Russian president and the start of Valeriy Gerasimov's tenure as Russia's chief of the general staff). Third, it considers Russian war-fighting in Ukraine in February and March 2022 with reference to Russian thinking about new war. Finally, it discusses the link between Russian military intellectual production and Russian military practice in light of the findings. The article argues that Russian military discussions about new war are a critical context for understanding the Russian intellectual failure in the war in Ukraine.

2. Previous research on Russia's new way of war

There has been a growing interest in Russian thinking about new war since about a decade. The main impetus for this was of course Russia's 2014 annexation of Ukraine's Crimea Peninsula, which was frequently interpreted in Western policy circles as heralding a new Russian approach to war, centred on hybrid force employment. Much of the subsequent Western scholarship on Russia's military has explored the development of Russian thinking and its operational application in Crimea and the Donbas and to an extent in Georgia (2008) and Syria (2015-).

Oscar Jonsson has written perhaps the fullest monograph on the evolution of Russian thinking on war in recent decades.²⁶ Focusing on the post-Soviet period and particularly the Putin era, whilst tracing the antecedents of recent Russian thought to the late Soviet period, it maps the development of a line of Russian military thinking that has increasingly played down the centrality of kinetic violence to war. As Jonsson points out, non-kinetic forms of influence, particularly information influence, have increasingly been interpreted as means of war by Russian theorists, many of whom have grown convinced that Russia has been in a state of war with the West for years.

Another monograph by Ofer Fridman homes in on the evolution of the concept of *gibridnaya voyna* (hybrid warfare) in Russian scholarly military discourse.²⁷ Fridman argues that notwithstanding its outward commonalities with the Western concept of "hybrid warfare," the Russian concept of *gibridnaya voyna* is rooted in a peculiarly Russian intellectual tradition that reaches back to Igor Panarin's theory of information war, Aleksandr Dugin's theory of net-centric war and the Russian emigré scholar Evgeniy Messner's theory of subversion-war. According to Fridman, *gibridnaya voyna*'s understanding of subversion through for example information influence and other non-kinetic action bears close resemblance to elements of these theories, positioning it within a tradition in Russian military that emphasizes the power of non-kinetic warfare.

If Fridman's and Jonsson's monographs focus on Russian military theorizing, Jānis Bērziņš (2020) has attempted to clarify how Russian military experts themselves conceptualize Russian military practice. In a number of articles published after Russia's annexation of Crimea, Bērziņš has argued against a perceived tendency in Western scholarship to frame Russian warfare within Western-developed concepts, such as *fourth-generation war* and *non-linear war* or for that matter *hybrid warfare*, on the grounds that such concepts fail to accurately characterize contemporary Russian warfare. More productive when examining Russian warfare, Bērziņš suggests, is to lean on concepts developed by Russian theorists themselves. Particularly, Bērziņš argues in one article from 2020, Russia's contemporary way of war can be understood through the concepts of *asymmetric warfare*, *low-intensity conflict*, *network-centric warfare*, and *sixth-generation warfare*, which are elaborated in

Russian theoretical work and have been combined in a hierarchy of ideas that underpin Russian war-waging in for example eastern Ukraine and Syria.

Similarly, the prolific Russia expert Mark Galeotti has queried whether the concept of hybrid war is a useful prism through which to understand Russian warfare. In an article from 2016, Galeotti argued that Russia's warfare in eastern Ukraine was best understood as building on Soviet and pre-Soviet practice and was "distinctive in terms of the degree to which [the Russians] are willing to give primacy to 'non-kinetic' means, the scale of integration of non-state actors, and tight linkage between political and military command structures."²⁸ In other words, Russian contemporary warfare is different from earlier Russian and Soviet warfare less in qualitative terms than in terms of the extent to which it has relied on integration of force employment and non-kinetic means. In a subsequent book, *Russian Political War. Moving Beyond the Hybrid* (2019), Galeotti proposed that Russia's then forceful but often non-kinetic behaviour might be appropriately understood as *political war*, loosely defined as an effort to use coercive and other undeclared means to move its positions forward geopolitically, while avoiding measures that might provoke a shooting war with the West.²⁹ This strategy, according to Galeotti, allowed Russia to capitalize on its strengths while limiting its liabilities.

Russia defense and security expert Bettina Renz adds to the critique of the concept of hybrid war as a lense for understanding Russian military and political action. She argues that it represents a quasi-theory that may obscure more than it explains, whilst it plays into the Russian leadership's hands by exaggerating Russian capabilities.³⁰ Although Renz does not explore Russian conceptualizations of its operational art, she argues that the Russian leadership's leveraging of various forms of pressure on target states cannot be subsumed under a single conceptual umbrella (be that "hybrid warfare" or something else). Any attempt to thus collapse multifaceted Russian thinking and action answers more to Western priorities, often political and discursive ones, than to the reality of Russian power projection.

The present author, too, has written about recent Russian military thinking, including Russian discussions about future war and the concept of *gibridnaya voyna*. One article argued that much of the Russian academic discourse on non-kinetic warfare had a securitizing function by casting a wide and ever widening range of non-military phenomena, from information dissemination to NGO activities and popular protests, as potential military threats.³¹ Another article, with Piotr Wawrzeniuk, noted that Russian visions of future warfare assumed that non-kinetic warfare would play an important part in the future but that such warfare might also escalate into armed confrontation, necessitating a high readiness for kinetic conflict in Russia's armed forces.³²

Russian actions in the Crimea, the Donbas and Syria, and its political operations in the West, have featured limited force deployment and varying degrees of risk aversion. The on-going large-scale war in Ukraine is a very different matter. It appears to have defied many Western assumptions about the Russian penchant for covertness, risk aversion and sub-threshold action. At the time of writing (mid-2023), there has still been limited scholarship about the large-scale war. Much of what has been written has focused on its urban warfare³³ and logistical³⁴ components, the role of foreign volunteers³⁵ and general Russian military capability,³⁶ and possible future outcomes.³⁷ Apart from an insightful commentary published by the Royal United Services Institute³⁸ and an article

that considers the declining effectiveness of Russian gray zone tactics in Ukraine prior to the February 2022 full-scale invasion,³⁹ there has been little consideration of the influence of Russian military thinking on Russian performance in Ukraine. The present article aims to address this gap.

3. Russian thinking on new war since the end of the cold war

With the end of the Cold War a rupture appeared in Russian military thinking, which had to update Soviet security and military axioms to the post-Cold War environment. After the Soviet Union had dissolved and the threat of an East-West nuclear confrontation had receded, Russia found itself in a new strategic environment, territorially reduced, militarily weakened and flanked to its west not by client states under its thumb but by a bracelet of former Warsaw Pact and Soviet countries with strong Western leanings. Russia had been diminished from the core unit of a superpower that had vied for global hegemony or at least parity with the West to a mid-ranking state determined on closer collaboration with the West to achieve political and economic stability.

In this transformed geopolitical setting, Russian military and security experts began to debate their country's future security and defense orientation. For some civilian members of Russia's security establishment, the new geopolitical reality meant that NATO had expired as a national threat and the major menace was no longer an all-out war with the North Atlantic alliance but instability on Russia's periphery and social and economic turmoil within Russia.⁴⁰ Indeed, Russian reformists called for downscaling Russia's vast reservist-based armed forces and for developing high-readiness units that, much like Western-style rapid reaction forces, could be deployed to crisis areas at short notice. The reformists were given wind in their sails when armed conflicts erupted in the southern Caucasus, Tajikistan and Moldova, and when the debacle of the First Chechen War (1994–1996) revealed the sorry state of Russia's conscript-based army.

The reformists' view of the future dovetailed with the discourse of liberal peace that had gained strength globally in the wake of the Soviet collapse. But it was a view not shared by everyone. Parts of Russia's military leadership persisted in arguing that the West posed the most important threat to Russia. In 1993, the Russian general staff drafted a document which emphasized that NATO remained Russia's main foe,⁴¹ and in 1995 it reportedly recommended an invasion of the Baltics should these countries move to join the Western alliance.⁴² The insistence on the West as the enduring main threat to Russia was paired with widespread resistance in the military elite to downscaling and reforming the armed forces.⁴³

The two visions of military threat – the mushrooming of local wars on Russia's periphery and the persistence of an east-west conflict – co-existed during much of the 1990s and shaped Russia's official security documentation, which was at times ambiguous and ambivalent. The 1993 Military Doctrine, the 1993 Foreign Policy Concept and the 1997 National Security Concept all contained elements of both visions, and both are also reflected in the late Russian general and head of the Russian Academy of the Military Sciences Makhmut Gareev's exposé about future war, *Esli zavtra voyna?*, translated into English as *If War Comes Tomorrow. The Contours of Future Armed Conflict*. In this short volume, Gareev argued that the danger of great-power conflict had waned following the

disappearance of bipolarism after the Cold War, whilst also stressing that the West remained Russia's main threat. A move to reconcile, or at least transcend, these contrasting views of Russia's threat environment may be seen as one of the structuring logics of the security and military discussions that unfolded in the new millennium, which will be discussed more below.

3.1. Ideas of non-kinetic warfare

As Oscar Jonsson notes, the late 2000s and 2010s saw a rise in ideas about non-kinetic warfare in Russian military discussions. One turning point in the evolution of Russian military thinking were the so-called Color Revolutions against authoritarian governments in post-socialist countries. Whilst the term "color revolution" was initially used as a neutral identifier in Russian political discourse, it eventually came to connote illegitimate Western meddling against Russia-aligned and other anti-Western regimes, specifically in former Soviet republics. In Russian discussions, it was often paired with the concept of *information war*, which had been elaborated by the Russian political scientist Igor Panarin and, before him, by the Russian philosopher Sergey Rastorguev, to convey the idea that Western actors were subverting unfriendly regimes through information operations.

Writing in 2010, Stephen J. Blank noted the rise in Russian discourse of ideas about color revolution, information warfare and other non-kinetic action and argued that this was occasioned in part by departmental infighting in Russia's security state. Blank contended that in their efforts to bid for increased resources from a political leadership that was receptive to Western threat imaginaries, the Russian Ministry of Defense and the Russian security services recycled and propagated Soviet-era threat imaginaries that centred on a malevolent West. In the absence of a realistic kinetic military threat against Russia, political, social and economic developments became securitized and cloaked in military terminology to justify the widening of the remit and budgets of Russia's power structures. In this way, the orientation of Russian security and defense policy in the 2000s involved a dusting off of inherited Soviet thinking adapted to a post-Soviet world.

Blank's argument is compelling. The securitization of non-military forms of domestic and international interaction was driven in large part by Russia's security establishment and underpinned efforts towards Russian security and military expansion in a context where there was no plausible Western armed threat against Russia. Nevertheless, something else, too, appears to have been at play, as became increasingly evident in the 2010s. Apart from justifying a stronger official security and military posture, the discourse on non-kinetic warfare involved also a move to integrate divergent Russian security conceptions into a single analytical framework, one that straddled the differences between those who had emphasized a diversified threat landscape and those who insisted on the persistence of east-west conflict.

This was done in part through the use of encompassive terminology. The central concepts that came to underline the Russian military discourse on new war in the 2010s were vague to begin with and became increasingly all-embracing with time. They came to encompass a very wide range of military and non-military threats, spanning low-level non-kinetic action, broader subversion, special operations and full-scale war. Initially, Russian security commentators spoke of *information war*,

then *color revolutions*, subsequently *next-generation warfare* and eventually *hybrid warfare* (*gibridnaya voyna*). Whilst *information war* was concerned with information influence and *color revolution* with the orchestration of popular movements by non-violent means (including information influence), *next-generation warfare* and *gibridnaya voyna* involved the use of a very broad gamut of measures, both kinetic and non-kinetic. *Gibridnaya voyna* represented the peak of the metastasizing of Russian military terminology. It subsumed both colour revolutions and information war and comprised both non-military and military measures. As the Russian major-general Aleksandr Vladimirov noted cryptically in his three-volume work *Osnovy obshchey teorii voyny* (The foundations of a general theory of war), hybrid warfare involves using “everything that is forbidden.”⁴⁴ Thus, the language of threat in the Russian security discourse became gradually more imprecise, offering a discursive resource for the labelling of an almost limitless phenomena as potential security threats. As the Russian military thinkers I.M. Popov and M.M. Khamzatov write in their book *Voyna Budushchego* (War of the Future), “[in Russia] the term *gibridnaya voyna* began to be understood as everything that did not fit into the notion of traditional armed struggle.”⁴⁵

The comprehensiveness of the terminology had two functions. First, it was used to argue for the expansion and coordination of non-military and military resources in order to ward off a perceived (Western) hybrid threat, the contours of which became ever vaguer with time. Much like in the West,⁴⁶ the concept of hybrid war was employed to argue for inter-departmental coordination and the widening of departmental powers.⁴⁷ Second, it permitted the designation of phenomena that in the 1990s had been identified as distinct security threats as components of a comprehensive Western assault on the Russian state. This included instability on Russia’s periphery, terrorism, economic problems and economic sanctions, all of which were now at times presented as elements of Western *gibridnaya voyna* against Russia. Everything from NGOs to regional war was subsumed under *gibridnaya voyna*. Marrying perceptions of a diversified Russian threat environment with inherited Western enemy images, it straddled the multiple threat perceptions of yore.⁴⁸ Hence, the concept of *gibridnaya voyna* not only securitized a virtually endless spectrum of perceived threats against Russia, but it also transcended the earlier bifurcation of Russia’s security debate between those who emphasized the existence of diversified and peripheral threats and those who insisted on the persistence of a major Western enemy.

Three features of the Russian concept of *gibridnaya voyna* should be highlighted. First, the concept locates the primary agency in hybrid warfare with foreign (read Western) actors, not local ones. Western states, and especially their intelligence services, are believed to hold the initiative over developments directed against anti-Western or Russia-aligned regimes, such as in Ukraine prior to 2013, Syria, Libya and Russia itself. Actors in these countries are seen to have only circumscribed freedom of manoeuvre, acting wilfully or unwittingly on behalf of foreign interests. As the two retired Russian military officers cum researchers Vladimir Kiselyov and Ivan Vorobyov wrote in an article in the prominent Russian military journal *Voennaya Mysl* (Military Thought) in 2015, for example, the decision by the three former Soviet Baltic republics, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, to join NATO in 2004 “can really be called a flawless hybrid operation”⁴⁹ set in motion by the West. This of course entirely disregarded the very strong domestic

drivers for membership in these countries that had been under Soviet occupation only a few years before.

Second, hybrid warfare is understood to be waged primarily through covert means, though it may escalate into open armed conflict as described below. Information operations, political subversion, special operations and other forms of covert and frequently non-attributable measures are seen as part and parcel of hybrid campaigns.

Third, hybrid warfare is viewed as a risk-averse strategy undertaken by an actor that lacks the appetite for a kinetic fight. In the context of growing international connectivity and an enduring nuclear threat, states are believed to opt for the deployment of non-kinetic means to advance their interests at the expense of other states. Hybrid warfare may thereby be seen as a substitute for direct and open military action, although it often involves the sponsoring, and covert use, of kinetic violence. It is a strategy that signals a lack, rather than the presence, of resolve. As Makhmut Gareev, the head of Russia's Academy of Military Sciences, said in an article in *Vestnik Voyennykh Akademii Nauk* in 2018:

In our time, the basic factor deterring a new global war are nuclear arms, but since [their use] is fraught with catastrophic consequences, the main type of confrontation between the bosses of the contemporary world resides in the pursuit of political aims in two ways: first, through subversive action, color revolutions within adversarial countries and large-scale information operations; and second, when required, through the use of military force and the attainment of strategic goals in parts by unleashing local wars and conflicts.⁵⁰

Paradoxically, hybrid warfare is also viewed as potentially escalatory. Russian military theorists like Aleksandr Bartosh and Kuchinskaia have suggested that low-level covert non-kinetic intervention – in the form of for example economic sanctions or the activation of fifth columns – may increase tensions to the point where they escalate into open and extended forms of violence, including full-scale war.⁵¹ Kuchinskaia, for her part, views the open use of armed force as the “final stage” of hybrid warfare after other, non-kinetic, options have been deployed.⁵² This emphasis on escalation sets the Russian thinking on hybrid war apart from ditto on color revolutions and information war, which are less focused on escalatory dynamics. It also testifies to the greater capacity of *gibridnaya voyna* to integrate various types of conflict in a catchall tray of war. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the escalation of hybrid war is likely to be contained in-theatre, i.e. in the country or region targeted by the hybrid war. The open military footprint of foreign actors tends to remain slight in hybrid war, according to Russian thinkers.⁵³

3.2. Russia's official embrace of *gibridnaya voyna*

After finding its way into non-official security discussions in Russia from the West in the late 2000s, the concept of *gibridnaya voyna* was eventually picked up by members of Russia's military leadership. For example, General Aleksandr Dvornikov, the first commander of the Russian military contingent in Syria and later a commander of the Russian forces in Ukraine, in an article in *Vestnik Akademii Voyennykh Nauk* in 2018, said Western states were “actively promoting the method of so-called ‘hybrid wars’ or ‘new-type’ wars, the basis of which are non-military measures.”⁵⁴ In the same journal issue,

Makhmut Gareev, asked rhetorically how Russia could withstand hybrid warfare, answering that doing so would require the development of new technologies and improved rapid deployment capability in line with what Russia's commander-in-chief Vladimir Putin had "convincingly and clearly" set out in an address to the Federal Assembly.⁵⁵ Additionally, in a 2016 article in *Voенно-Промышленныи Кур'ер*, Valeriy Gerasimov employed the concept together with the related terms of "hybrid threats and "hybrid methods."⁵⁶

Gerasimov has been one of the main official endorsers of the Russian thinking on new war and has repeatedly emphasized the role that non-kinetic measures may play in war since acceding to the post as chief of the general staff in 2012.⁵⁷ His most explicit articulation of how Russia might deploy armed force in response to threats emanating from new types of power projection came in an address to the Academy of Military Sciences in 2019, where he reflected on the lessons that Russia could learn from its military campaign in Syria, conducted since autumn 2015.

Stating that contemporary war had tended to be waged either remotely by high-precision weaponry or covertly through subversion and information operations (or through a combination of the two), Gerasimov argued that the Syrian war was a case of the latter, that is, an instance where foreign meddling and subversion had brought destabilization and set the country on the path to war.⁵⁸ In response to this, according to Gerasimov, Russia had launched a swift and limited military intervention, warding off the aggression and helping to consolidate the position of the Syrian government. Gerasimov suggested that the campaign had demonstrated the importance of relying on speed, surprise and control over the information environment when responding to threats abroad.

For Gerasimov, the Syrian campaign provided the basis for articulating a "strategy of limited actions." This was a concept (rather than a strategy) of how Russia could employ military force abroad to defend its national interests. According to Gerasimov, it involved "the creation of a self-sufficient grouping of forces on the basis of one of the branches of the armed forces in possession of high mobility and the capacity to make the greatest contribution to the achievement of the set task." It required "information superiority" and the "covert deployment of the necessary grouping."⁵⁹ Although Gerasimov did not explicitly mention special operations forces, the explicit referencing of the Syrian campaign, in which GRU *spetsnaz* forces and the Special Operations Forces Command had played key roles, implied he believed this force type would constitute an important element of the new concept. This is also the view of Roger McDermott, who identifies Russia's new elite Special Operations Command as a component of the "strategy of limited actions."⁶⁰

Gerasimov's reading of the lessons of the Syrian campaign was not firmly rooted in reality. In fact, it had been less Russian military surprise and prowess that had paved the way for Russia's operational success in Syria than the United States' decision to cede operational ground to Russia in favour of a strategy of dividing the country into de facto zones of responsibility maintained through a bilateral policy of deconfliction. Nor were the Russian forces in Syria self-sufficient. They not only depended on extended and vulnerable supply lines that could have been disrupted by a determined Western adversary but also shape-shifted time and again, incorporating and shedding force elements from *spetsnaz*

and military police to Wagner Group mercenaries as the situation on the ground and the political context demanded. Without detracting from the performance of Russia's aerospace forces, elite ground forces and the cohort of military advisors who served in Syria, their operations were undertaken in an environment where they faced both an inferior foe and little interference from the West.

Yet Gerasimov's thoughts on the lessons of Syria reveal the influence of new war thinking at the top of the Russian military establishment prior to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. They also indicate some of the analytical reflexes that arose from a belief that armed conflict grows primarily out of foreign machinations, not internal social and political dynamics. In Syria, covert and rapid deployment was seen as pivotal to Russia's seizing of the initiative and deterring foreign escalatory countermeasures. Equally, establishing control over the information space was viewed as crucial for thwarting foreign information operations. The divisions and weakness of the Syrian armed opposition, the rivalries among its Western, Turkish and Gulf State backers, and indeed the central roles played by Iranian and Iranian-backed ground forces in the pro-regime military campaign, rarely seemed to factor into the Russian analysis that couched the conflict within the *gibridnaya voyna* paradigm.

3.3. Main points of Russian thinking about new war

As shown, Russian thinking about new war in recent years has been underpinned by a roster of concepts, from the narrower *information war* and *color revolution* to the nearly all-embracing *gibridnaya voyna*, which covers kinetic and non-kinetic force projection, including information war and color revolutions, while emphasizing escalatory dynamics. It represents a form of conceptual bloating where various types of threats, challenges and other circumstances have been amalgamated under umbrella terms.

The discourse on new war is of course no monolith. Even the discussions on *gibridnaya voyna* manifest some notable, if minor, variations,⁶¹ with different Russian security and military thinkers, including Maria Kuchinskaia and Aleksandr Bartosh, interpreting the staple terms of the discourse differently. Nevertheless, the discourse does turn on a number of key points. These include:

- a focus on the agency of foreign actors, as opposed to domestic actors.
- a focus on non-kinetic and covert forms of power projection.
- an understanding of new war as undertaken by risk-averse foreign (Western) actors with a disappetite for kinetic military commitments.

The following section demonstrates that the Ukraine war was portrayed as an instance of *gibridnaya voyna* in high-level Russian military and security discourse long before the beginning of the full-scale invasion of 24 February 2022. Subsequently, with the full-scale invasion, Russian planning initially emphasised non-kinetic and covert action, whilst conventional preparations were prioritized less. Furthermore, Russian strategy assumed the West would be loath to match Russian escalation with increased military commitment to Ukraine.

4. Russian thinking of new war and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine

4.1. *The Ukraine War as gibridnaya voyna*

The armed conflict that has been on-going in Ukraine since Russia's annexation of the Crimea in early 2014 has repeatedly been interpreted in Russian military and security publications within the framework of *gibridnaya voyna*. For example, in December 2021, Aleksandr Bartosh together with Anatoly Letiago, a professor at Russia's Academy of Military Sciences, wrote in *Voenno-Promyshlenniy Kiur'er* (VPK) that the United States and NATO were seeking the "establishment of cognitive control over Ukraine, Georgia and a number of other states for the intellectual enslavement of their elites and a part of their populations."⁶² In another article in the weekly *Ezhenedel'nik Zvezda* published around the same time, Letiago spoke of "the buildup of NATO's military presence near the borders of our country [and] the transformation of Ukraine into a springboard for aggression against Russia."⁶³ Bartosh, in a 2018 article in the Ministry of Defense's flagship journal *Military Thought*, wrote that the allegedly "apt use of Ukraine in hybrid warfare waged by the Allied West against Russia points to the highly destructive potential and danger of nonlinear conflicts countering which takes a resolute and rapid reaction."⁶⁴ Aleksey Leonov, a military expert at the journal *Arsenal Otechestva*, foreshadowing official rhetoric on Ukraine, wrote in *Ezhenedel'nik Zvezda* in 2020 about "proxy-hybrid operations, as a result of which the leadership of the state is changed either by non-violent means ... or by a coup d'état ... which ultimately leads to the creation of a new state, for example – a terrorist one – ISIS ... or a quasi-fascist one – Ukraine."⁶⁵

Senior Russian security and military officials, too, have described Ukraine as a target and instrument of Western hybrid warfare. For example, Valeriy Gerasimov, writing in VPK after Russia's annexation of the Crimea and the outbreak of hostilities in Donetsk and Luhansk Provinces, said the "civil conflict" in eastern Ukraine was unfolding "against the backdrop of efforts to transform Ukraine into a source of long-term controlled instability, bringing direct harm to the geopolitical interests of the Russian Federation and the processes of integration of the post-Soviet space."⁶⁶ Elsewhere, he has labeled the "kindling of nationalism in Ukraine" an example of the "hybrid methods" used to wage contemporary wars.⁶⁷ Makhmut Gareev, in an article in *Vestnik Akademii Voyennykh Nauk*, in the same vein listed the conflicts in Iraq, Libya, Syria and Ukraine as instances of "non-military threats, 'soft power' and in general hybrid wars."⁶⁸

According to this, the main agency behind the conflict in Ukraine lay with those employing hybrid methods in pursuit of broader geopolitical aims that harm Russia. Ukrainian domestic drivers are skirted over in a discourse that presents Ukraine as little more than an arena and victim of Western hybrid warfare. The emphasis on Western machinations was indeed part and parcel of the official Russian justifications of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In Vladimir Putin's address on the morrow of the invasion, the focus was almost entirely on the misdeeds of the West, particularly the United States, whilst Ukraine is portrayed as victim, controlled by Western powers and their small number of local far-right and neo-Nazi acolytes. According to Putin, the decision to declare a "special military operation" was about "defending Russia from those who have taken Ukraine hostage and are trying to use it

against our country and our people.”⁶⁹ There was little recognition of Ukrainian agency.

4.2. A focus on non-kinetic, covert and non-attributable forms of power projection

The military operation that Russia launched to counter the alleged malignant Western influence in Ukraine was centred heavily on non-kinetic and covert forms of power projection. There was theoretical justification for this. As mentioned, according to Gerasimov, non-kinetic measures may be as effective as kinetic ones. Acts of subversion, information operations and other non-kinetic measures may destabilize and transform a target state as much as a campaign of armed warfare, if not more, according to the chief of the general staff. Whilst it is difficult to gauge the immediate impact of such ideas on the operational planning of the full-scale invasion, there was a distinct emphasis on non-kinetic, covert and non-attributable forms of power projection in the initial phase of the invasion, with conventional military measures given less importance.

This is borne out by a report by the Royal United Service Institute from late March 2023, which details the non-kinetic and other covert operations that were undertaken by Russia prior to and in the initial stages of the full-scale invasion.⁷⁰ The report, authored by Jack Watling, Oleg Danylyuk and Nick Reynolds (2023), describes the subversion, psychological operations, covert and clandestine operations and intelligence and counterintelligence activities (termed “unconventional operations in the report) conducted by Russia in Ukraine. These actions were expected to accelerate Ukraine’s defeat through “internal destabilisation and disorganisation” and “disable the system of government and military command and control, undermine public trust in government institutions, reduce national stability and minimise aid to Ukraine from international partners.”⁷¹ As the report suggests, “The invasion itself can be seen as the intended culmination of a long unconventional campaign waged by Russia against Ukraine.”⁷²

Both the RUSI report and other sources⁷³ note that a central component of Russia’s covert and non-kinetic efforts in Ukraine was a network of intelligence assets which had been cultivated and organized by Russian security services for a decade.⁷⁴ The assets included key Ukrainian personnel in security and political structures and in the management of Ukrainian nuclear energy infrastructure. In many cases, top Ukrainian officials were recruited by the Russian intelligence services, whilst their subordinates, who acted on their instructions, were generally unaware that they were indirectly doing the bidding of Russia’s spies. As the date of the full-scale invasion neared, the FSB, which had been handed a key role in its planning and execution, became tasked with finding ways to utilize the assets to facilitate and support the invasion and the subsequent occupation.⁷⁵ Strikingly, the work on this appears to have begun already in June 2021, in other words, around eight months before the start of the full-scale invasion. This lengthy preparation time contrasts sharply with the limited time, sometimes only days or hours, afforded to some of Russia’s conventional units ahead of the invasion.

The initial phase of the full-scale invasion had an important kinetic component, centred on the use of special operations forces (*spetsnaz*) to infiltrate Ukrainian cities, the deployment of airborne forces (*voenno-desantnoe voiska*, VDV) to seize strategic sites such as Hostomel Airport and the dispatch of motorized rifle and national guard units for

force projection and as would-be occupation forces. However, by all appearances, there was little anticipation of any large-scale Ukrainian armed resistance or need to engage in extensive combat operations. This is indicated by the scant logistical support provided to many of the Russian military units (some of which received supplies only for a few days) and the tactics with which especially the motorized rifle and national guard units were deployed. The latter frequently dispersed and pushed deep into Ukrainian territory with little logistical or combat support, flank protection or reconnaissance about Ukrainian resistance, which left them highly vulnerable to motivated and mobile Ukrainian forces who promptly destroyed a large number of them.

Indeed, even the assault on Hostomel Airport near Kyiv, arguably the main point of attack of the initial invasion, appears to have been ill-prepared and underdimensioned, failing to take the actual strength of Ukrainian resistance into account. In spite of explicit warnings by US CIA director William Burns that Russian forces were intending to seize the strategically important airport, the airport was left weakly defended by Ukrainian forces.⁷⁶ On the day of the invasion only around 300 Ukrainian national guard troops, most of whom had been deployed there the day before, guarded it.⁷⁷ Even so, there were concentrations of Ukrainian forces, including artillery, special forces and the Georgian Legion, in the vicinity. The initial Russian landing force, while suffering significant casualties, managed to overcome the National Guard troops and take the airport but were besieged and beaten back by the other Ukrainian units that rushed to the area, preventing the Russians from using the airport to bring in large reinforcements.

4.3. A view of Western states as risk-averse

If the Kremlin believed Ukraine's slide towards the West was the handiwork of Western governments, it also seemed to bank on insufficient Western resolve to respond to Russian armed escalation with strong support to Ukraine. Much as during the 2014 Crimean annexation and the 2015 Syrian campaign, the assumption in Moscow appears to have been that the West was risk-averse, loath to absorb the economic and other costs that would be incurred from determined support to Ukraine. As the Guardian journalist Luke Harding has summarized: "The Kremlin had calculated that the democratic world's reaction would be similar to that of 2014, after Crimea: harsh words, minor sanctions, and not much else."⁷⁸

In an apparent attempt to encourage Western inaction, Moscow used threats and intimidation, including of nuclear attack. In his February 24 address, Putin said notoriously:

I would now like to say something very important for those who may be tempted to interfere in these developments from the outside. No matter who tries to stand in our way or all the more so create threats for our country and our people, they must know that Russia will respond immediately, and the consequences will be such as you have never seen in your entire history. No matter how the events unfold, we are ready. All the necessary decisions in this regard have been taken. I hope that my words will be heard.

As noted above, the threat of nuclear escalation is one of the circumstances on which the theory of hybrid war is predicated upon, as governments are said to act covertly to avoid the danger of escalation. Nevertheless, Putin's nuclear threats were little more than

bluster. The West did interfere in the developments, including with large-scale arms deliveries to Ukraine and economic sanctions on Russia, with no immediate or historically unprecedented consequences for their own part. Whilst Putin's nuclear sabre rattling, which has continued until the time of writing, may have given some pause to Ukraine's backers and tempered foreign reactions, it has not prevented the West from becoming a powerful party to the war, even as it has borne significant costs.

5. Conclusion

Numerous explanations have been put forth for Russia's poor military performance in the early stages of the full-scale war in Ukraine, including logistical failures, widespread corruption and flawed intelligence. This article has focused on the intellectual context of new war thinking and its influence on Russian operational planning on Ukraine. It has argued that Russia's focus on non-kinetic subversion, its de-emphasis of conventional combat operations and its assumption that Ukraine's Western backers would prevaricate in the face of Russian escalation cohered with a line of thinking that emphasized the efficacy of non-kinetic action and assumed that Ukraine was an arena of Western hybrid warfare against Russia. This thinking had been endorsed by top Russian military and security thinkers and promoted in particular by Russia's chief of the general staff Valery Gerasimov, who equally played a central role in the planning of the invasion.

The article does not suggest that new war thinking was the only important cause of Russia's poor performance in Ukraine, nor does it claim that the thinking lacked intellectual merit. Russian subversion in southern Ukraine, including in Nova Kakhovka and on the Crimean isthmus, was successful and helped pave the way for the rapid takeover of a large tract of territory by Russian forces in this part of Ukraine. The Russian leadership was not necessarily foolish in assuming it could work. This is particularly true given the importance of contingencies. For example, had Russian forces successfully established a foothold at the Antonov airport in Hostomel in the early days of the invasion, they would have been in a far better position to move forces into Kyiv and keep them supplied thereafter. Indeed, researchers at the Atlantic Council have suggested that Russia's failure to take Antonov airport "possibly prevent[ed] a rapid capture" of the capital.⁷⁹

Even so, it is difficult to explain Russia's miscalculations in Ukraine without reference to this intellectual context. From Moscow's excessive faith in the power of non-kinetic measures and failure to anticipate large-scale Ukrainian resistance, to its faith in the indecisiveness of Ukraine's Western supporters and failure to prepare the bulk of Russian conventional forces for extensive combat operations, the new-war discourse helps to explain why choices that may seem foolhardy in retrospect could have appeared reasonable, even necessary, to members of Russia's political and military leadership at the time.

Western scholarship has debated the relationship between Russian military theorizing and Russian military practice, including the extent to which Russia views its own warfare as "hybrid." However, this debate partly misses the point. Russian military theorizing has often been undertaken on the premise that Russia is faced with hybrid warfare from other (i.e. Western) states and needs to respond accordingly. Syria and Ukraine, among other conflicts, have been interpreted as cases of hybrid war waged against Russian interests. Russia views its actions in these theatres

not so much as hybrid war as responses to hybrid war or counter-hybrid warfare. The intellectual framework of new war thinking, which has gained prominence in Russian military and security circles in recent years, has formed the paradigm within which Russia's military-political leadership has analyzed not only the dynamics of foreign armed conflicts but also the options that are open to Russia in responding to them. More specifically, the paradigm has framed Russia's military-political leadership's thinking about the conflict in Ukraine and the appropriate course of action in responding to it.

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