



The War in Ukraine and the Return of History

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Russia's invasion of Ukraine came as a surprise. The West believed for a long time that Great Power conflict was a thing of the past, that war itself was no longer a central feature of international relations. It was not a view shared by the rest of the world, and certainly not by Russia. The Ukraine war is in part a product of the misreading of history. It is also threatening to become for the Russians an existential struggle that they cannot afford to lose. What if the European peace we have come to celebrate is just a 30-year experiment sandwiched between much longer phases of conflict?

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'You should move to a small town where the rule of law still exists. This is the land of the wolves now. And you are not a wolf.' (Del Toro in *Sicario*)

At the conclusion of his magisterial history of the world, Simon Sebag Montefiore writes that the war in Ukraine marks the end of an exceptional period in human history – 70 years of peace between the world's Great Powers divided into two phases: 45 years of the Cold War, and a quarter of a century of American unipolarity. 'The Russian invasion is a return to normality. Normal disorder has been resumed' [1]. Unable to achieve swift regime change, Putin has settled for eliminating Ukraine as a functioning country. To the 16% of the population that has been internally displaced, thousands have disappeared (many of them children sent to Siberia); the four annexed republics have been ethnically cleansed, its cities taken apart by drone strikes. The wanton butchery and terror that has characterised Russian operations from the very beginning remind us what history was like in times when there were no mobile phones to record the atrocities.

In this essay, I am going to argue that we had simply forgotten the role that war has played in history and is threatening to play once again. Instead, we told ourselves comforting stories of a globalised world where ethnic identity and national chauvinism have lost out to the logic of the market. The Europeans have long claimed to have discovered a version of Immanuel Kant's 'perpetual peace'. Many years ago, the Czech author Milan Kundera reassured his readers that the Germans and French were now 'anthropologically' incapable of going to war against each other. Note, not economically or politically or even culturally, but *anthropologically*. In other words, war was no longer encoded in their cultural DNA.

Browse the bookshelves and you will find many authors spinning this tale. One is Steven Pinker, the author of *The Better Angels of our Nature* and *Enlightenment Now*, another John Mueller, the author of *The Retreat from Doomsday*, and then there is John Horgan, a former editor of *Scientific American* and author of a book called *The End of War*, whose title leaves you in no doubt about its conclusion. In his book *Enlightenment Now* (2017), Pinker insisted that war was now largely only of historical interest. But he also told us in the same work that because it was now much easier to identify pathogens and invent vaccines, pandemics had probably disappeared from history [2]. It is great story to tell and on the face of it, it is one that is almost too good to be true. It is easy to forget that such a phrase usually means 'not true'. Now, we are told by epidemiologists that the 21st century is likely to be the century of pandemics and global warming (the two are interlinked) in the same way that the 20th century was the century of revolution and total war (they too, were intimately interlinked).

The Ukraine war is a classic wake-up call which was long delayed. Cast your eye around the world: at Syria's broken cities, like Aleppo, whose medieval seminaries have been destroyed and its ancient citadel damaged beyond repair. Or give a thought to the global War on Terror, now over twenty years old with no end in sight. Some American soldiers who were pulled out of Afghanistan in 2021 were first-grade students on the day the World Trade Center was attacked. A depressing fault line, in fact, runs through the world dividing those regions that are at peace with themselves and those that are not. Only a few years ago, professors were even reassuring their students that there wouldn't be another Great Power war. Today, we are far less sanguine, whether the West finds itself at war with China or Russia or a medium power like Iran. The new buzzwords in the military field are 'directed energy', 'hypersonic missiles', 'space', 'cyber', and 'quantum computing', and very soon artificially intelligent machines will be waging war on our behalf, or possibly their own. Never place a loaded gun on the table, wrote Chekhov unless it is going to go off at some point in the play. It is wrong to make promises you can't keep! Eventually any weapon we invent will be used.

We forget at our peril what a tenacious hold war has on history. It can flare up when least expected, as it did in 1914, or sneak up unsuspected, as it did in Syria ten years ago. 'You may not be interested in war', Trotsky famously remarked, 'but war is interested in you.' The sentiment, though hackneyed, it is still as true as the day he said it.

THE WORLD BEFORE UKRAINE

What we ignored before the war in Ukraine was the world disorder all around us. All that we escaped and then briefly in 1989 was a sub-set of war: Great Power conflict. In truth the rest of the world had not escaped war's iron grip on life. Think of the wars that were waged between

2001–2019. There were 106¹, involving more than a hundred nations [3]. Most were fought in the Middle East, West Africa, and in what the Russians like to call their Near Abroad – the periphery of the old Soviet empire. But who in the West caught a glimpse on television of the conflict in the Niger Delta, which first broke out in 2004, and what television companies provided prime-time coverage to the civil war in Chad (2005–2010)? When we switched on our TVs, we watched a series of conflicts like the war in Afghanistan, which were filtered through a particular lens, the War on Terror.

We have also seen a dramatic transformation in our understanding of war itself. Military analysts are forever declaring the onset of a new age of warfare, but perhaps in this case it has already arrived. The point is that war is a shape-shifting phenomenon; ‘new’ wars arise as swiftly as the old disappear. Periodic plot twists arise all the time. One way to think about war, to invoke a timely metaphor, is to regard it as a virus which produces many different variants. In the last few years academics have rebranded war as ‘surrogate’, ‘Fourth Generation’, ‘irregular’, ‘proxy’, ‘hybrid’, ‘non-linear’, ‘grey zone’, ‘shadow’, and ‘vicarious’. It is in the nature of any virus to produce variants; in the case of war, they are shaped by culture and technology. Before Putin’s ‘special military operation’ in Ukraine, hybrid warfare was probably the most discussed thanks to what happened in the Crimea in 2014, which witnessed the deployment of disinformation, botnets, military proxies, and soldiers in disguise. But old-fashioned conventional wars are still fought, as we have seen in the Ukraine. Meanwhile the Chinese and the Americans are already gaming World War 3. If you want to know what it may look like, read two recent novels: *Ghost Fleet* (2017) and *2034: A novel of the next world war* (2021).

We have also tended to ignore what was perhaps the most significant challenge of all. Whenever we think of cyber-attacks against the West every other week, most of which go unreported, or information warfare or the constant assault on our democratic systems by troll factories in Russia that you can read about in Nina Jankowicz’s book, *How to Lose the Information War* (2009), the West may well conclude (as many commentators do) that it has been ‘at war’ with Russia since its cyberattack on Estonia in 2007. We all find ourselves living in what Lucas Kello calls an era of ‘Unpeace’, a new era of mid-spectrum rivalry which is especially visible in cyberspace [5].

It is becoming increasingly difficult these days to distinguish war from peace. For war can now be played out not only on the battlefield but in the minds of citizens at home. Our societies are becoming more vulnerable everyday thanks to the fact that we have weaponised our high-tech tools. There are at least 30 billion internet-connected devices in the world; 130 are added to the web every second. Every one of them is vulnerable to attack, as too are the servers which power the cloud, on which so much of the world’s data is stored. In fact, it is becoming increasingly difficult to define the meaning of ‘peace’ in a digital era which denies us peace of mind.

SO, WHAT IS WAR FOR?

Morality aside, some of you of course may think that asking what war is for is rather like asking a question that is popular these days: what is a corporation for? Clearly, to make a profit. But CEOs like to issue statements of purpose in which you will find that they are leery of using the word ‘profit’ and prefer instead to talk instead of ‘corporate social responsibility’. A striking example is the French company Danone, which liked to claim that its corporate mission was bringing ‘health through food’. Its former CEO, Emmanuel Faber even boasted that he had toppled the statue of Milton Friedman, but in March 2020 the shareholders toppled him – they fired him for not making enough money. These purpose statements have been hitting the headlines for some time and we should not be fooled by them. Cecil Rhodes, a former CEO, called empire-building ‘95% philanthropy and 5% profit’. The reality was rather different, which is why his statues have been toppled from Cape Town to Oxford.

Like our unfortunate CEO, if you come from the West, you might claim that the purpose of war is to fight for human rights as NATO did in Kosovo, the first – and probably last – ‘humanitarian war’ in history. One of the reasons that Putin chanced his hand in 2022 was that he believed that the West had lost the plot; it was obsessed with ‘statements of purpose’. The vernacular

1 Total number of wars calculated from [3] and [4].

in Afghanistan was captured by a British journalist [6] who attended a briefing in Kabul in 2009 eight years into the campaign:

‘Agents for Change’, ‘Alternative Livelihoods’, ‘Asymmetric Means of Operation’, ‘Capability Milestones’, ‘Demand Reduction’, ‘Drivers of Radicalisation’, ‘Fledgling Capabilities’, ‘Injectors of Risk’, ‘Kinetic Situation’, ‘Light Footprint’, ‘Capacity Building’, ‘Reconciliation and Reintegration’, ‘Shake-Clear-Hold’ and ‘Upskilling’

What he claimed to have caught was not the meaning but the ambient noise or, to mix metaphors, the ‘acrylic blanket’ of the language of modern warfare [6]. Twelve years before its ignominious withdrawal from the country, he concluded that NATO was on no win mission. The whole mission was an attempt to produce what the US military calls ‘sustained behavioural change’ at the national level. In the end the US pulled out, not because its goals had been achieved but because it had given up on them. The basic assumption of the whole benighted NATO mission was based on the belief that the Afghans wanted what the West wanted for them, or what they wanted them to want. (The ultimate error, however, was thinking that you could fight a war and rebuild a nation at the same time; it has never been done before. The only examples of successful regime change by the US military [Germany/Japan 1945; Grenada/1983; Panama/1989] were undertaken after the fighting had stopped).

But in every war the payoff is the same: winning. Winning matters and in most wars nothing else matters more. So, what – for the Russians – is the present war ‘for’? War is riddled with purpose, it always involves an endgame, but different countries have different purposes and entertain different reasons for going to war. The three principal ones: fear, honour, and interest were identified by Thucydides two thousand years ago, and they remain as valid today as ever.

1 FEAR

For the Russians the Ukraine war has become an existential struggle. It didn’t start out that way. Like the West they saw Ukraine as a corrupt, failed state that would fold at the first push. Instead, the Ukrainians have found a purpose in the world and a unity they never enjoyed in peacetime. In her book, *Paradise Built in Hell*, Rebecca Solnit writes that an unexpected and widespread response to disaster seems to be joy, not only at having survived an ordeal but at being provided with an opportunity to put our heroic selves on display [7]. It seems that many of us also want to experience the heroic at least once in our lives. This may be because only in times of crisis do some of us feel more fully alive. Rates of anxiety, depression, and even psychosis, psychologists tell us, seem to decline when a society finds itself at war. The very act of overcoming adversity and the recognition that some of our fellow citizens are willing to sacrifice their lives for the rest of us can reinforce pride in our own humanity.

But the Russians are not going to give up the fight. They fear that if they were to lose, Russia would become a sub-optimal strategic player, a kind of Eurasian Iran. It is a centuries-old fear. The relationship between old and new, wrote Hannah Arendt, is ‘more complex than it seems at first glance. The past does not always pull back but progresses forwards and contrary to what one would expect, it is the future which drives us back into the past’ [8]. In his long and tedious essays on the Ukraine and its historical relationship with Russia Putin invoked the past time and again for fear that the country did not have much of a future. The essays captured both his evasive relationship to the truth but also his country’s complex relationship with its own history.

Russia’s past is also bound up with its supposed ‘exceptionalism’. Only a few people still claim to be exceptional. One is Russia, another the United States, the oldest is of course the Chosen People, the Jews. ‘We must hope God loves us as much as we love him’, remarked the Jewish philosopher Spinoza, ‘because there’s no evidence of it in the historical record’. Russia has always aspired to be a Great Power as much out of fear as interest. Unfortunately, its capabilities have rarely matched its aspirations, except for a brief period in the 1930s, when left-wing intellectuals travelled to Moscow to see their own future. At every stage in Russia’s history, the West has always been more powerful, more dynamic economically; it has also enjoyed a much greater cultural pull and built much better technology. And at every stage of its history since Peter the Great, Russia has tried to compensate for this weakness by a show of strength.

In the case of Ukraine, there may be another factor at play. War, wrote the novelist John Fowles, is ‘a psychosis caused by an inability to see relationships’ [9]. The sheer simplicity of this definition is seductive, but it’s also highly misleading. You could argue not only that war is not a psychosis, it is still less an evolutionary maladaptation. It’s intrinsically social and arises precisely from the social networks we forge. The oldest division in history is social – between the ‘in-group’ and the ‘out’. Norms that grossly devalue out-group members can be favoured by in-group selection, as the anthropologist Joe Heinrich points out; sometimes it can inspire its members even to exterminate the competition [10]. But even in-groups can fracture. In some myths, war arose from sibling rivalry, from brother fighting brother. Think of Cain’s murder of Abel after their parents were expelled from Eden, or Romulus’ murder of Remus, which was the founding act of Rome. Both murders alert us to something quite disturbing: whatever brotherhood human beings may be capable of may well have grown out of fratricide [11]. Brotherhood and war are often related. Putin invaded Ukraine to ‘liberate’ the Ukrainians from fascism and reunite them with the Russians, their ethnic ‘brothers.’ It hasn’t worked out that way; instead, the invasion has solidified Ukrainian national consciousness.

2 HONOUR

‘Who are you looking at, Jimmy?’ is not a question you want to be asked in a Glasgow pub on a Friday night. The Russian equivalent is ‘*ty menya uvazhaesh* – do you respect me, Ivan?’ And there is a sound historical explanation for why you might be asked the question. In a country that has never known the rule of law or a politically accountable government, to be disrespected is to find oneself at another person’s mercy. And to be respected for one’s achievements rather than one’s might carries no special resonance with the Russian people. Nothing has changed since the fall of communism. Don’t expect any significant public opposition to the war. As Michael Burleigh wrote of the German people in the 1930s, they ‘abdicated their individual critical faculties in favour of a politics based on faith, hope, hatred and sentimental collective self-regard for their own nation’ [12]. The Russian people may not have much faith or hope, but they are famous for their collective self-regard.

Russia is not alone, of course. After 9/11 the United States spent \$7 trillion getting back its credibility (what honour has become in a mercenary age). The defeat of Taliban was not enough, insisted Henry Kissinger who backed the invasion of Iraq as necessary to re-establish America’s credibility [13]. Of the many reasons that countries go to war, *status anxiety* is one of the most important, for to lose status as Russia has done since the end of the Cold War is to find oneself in a world in which the strong do what they wish, and the weak what they must. This was expressed first perhaps in Putin’s threat at the Munich security conference back in 2007 [14]: ‘treat us with a modicum of respect; why do you refuse others the security you insist on yourself?’ The formula is very simple: peace won’t bring security, but security will produce peace.

3 INTEREST

In most cases of war, we are dealing with power and power involves interests, material and spiritual. War, writes the historian Tim Blanning, can be defined as the exercise of power at its most brutal [15]. Different war aims are simply varieties of power: the vanity of nationalism, the wish to export an ideology, the protection of kinsmen in an adjacent land, the desire for more territory or larger market share, the avenging of a defeat or insult, the craving for greater national strength or independence, the wish to impress allies or cement alliances. All these in very different ways represent power in different wrappings [15]. The exercise of power is probably the one irreducible reality behind any act of violence, individual or collective.

And what often impresses most is the application of power for its own sake. At the personal level this can be disastrous. The great conquerors of history like Hitler and Napoleon may well have suffered from a power psychosis. Over time power can have an addictive dopamine-boosting effect on the brain, producing behavioural changes such as a loss of empathy, grandiosity, and paranoia. Such changes in the frontal lobe of the brain can often diminish the affected person’s ability to weigh up risk. Think of Alexander the Great, who would have gone on fighting until he eventually was killed in battle had his army not forced him to turn back, or Napoleon, who

undid everything he had achieved by invading Russia. Two years of isolation in the Kremlin and twenty-two years of power may have had a similar effect on Putin. In Russia we are witnessing a state that is setting back its own development by decades because of the folly of a disastrous war originally intended to be fought for a very limited and apparently achievable end: to make Ukraine a client state of its larger neighbour.

But was that ambition ever rational? Putin had no need to invade Ukraine on February 24. If he had not, the country would have continued its regression into a corrupt, failed state it was well on the way to becoming, on the Transparency Corruption Index just marginally ahead of Gabon and Zambia [16]. So why did he invade? ‘War is a daemonic power that shapes our lives outside the governance of reason’, writes George Steiner in *The Death of Tragedy*. When governments act irrationally, we shouldn’t be surprised. Unfortunately, we usually are because we still cling to the economists’ mistaken view of rational man, *homo Economicus*. The rational actor model presumes that we make choices aimed at maximising material payoffs based on all the available information of the time. The model is not wrong in presuming that people do indeed try to be rational, at least most the time. The problem is that we are not as intelligent as we like to think, and often we have great difficulty identifying what is in the true interests.

Different ideas about reality also explain very different styles of behaviour. Some of us are more fearful of failure than we are of achieving success; others will be willing to take a leap of faith into the future, even at some risk to themselves. Our decisions are also often based on irrational heuristics and biases of which we are not always consciously aware. And we are frequently given to unwarranted optimism: we think we will succeed even in the face of evidence that we won’t. And if one way of being rational is to learn the lessons of history, we appear to be chronically incapable of doing so.

These characteristics of human nature are no different today than they were back in the Stone Age, when our ancestors gathered round a fireplace to tell each other stories to sharpen their understanding of reality. So, is the problem with war the stories we choose to tell, or the language in which we tell them? Every grammar has rules, tenses, and conjugations that shape the way we think, though languages differ quite a lot. Classical Chinese – the language of Sun Tzu – had no syntax. Nor, for that matter did it have any tenses, so that it was possible to describe an action without revealing when it actually happened. In the Indo-European languages, this is quite impossible with one exception: the Russian language. ‘Perhaps, the secret for understanding Russian history lies in its grammar’, writes one Russian dissident. In Latin, English, and German the pluperfect describes an action completed. The Russian language has no such tense. It’s an unfortunate grammatical loss, for nothing in Russian history ever seems to become history. Like a stubborn page in a new book, it refuses to be turned over by the reader. Everything seems to happen again and again. Tsars continue to reappear in different guises at different times, as Stalin or Putin; dissidents of all persuasions, or none (contrarians) continue to be locked up; the Russian Bear continues to menace its neighbours, and its wars are framed these days as eternal repeats of the Great Patriotic War (1941–45). The country seems to be locked into an endless ‘past imperfect’ [17].

Speaking to journalists in January, the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov accused the West of putting together a coalition to deal with the Russians as Hitler had dealt with the Jews. ‘They are waging war against our country with the same aim “the final solution” of the Russian question’ [18]. Casting oneself as the victim of the Ukraine war is also very Russian – it was the country after all, that aided Napoleon until 1812 and Nazi Germany until 1941, only to find itself attacked. The invader now see itself as the victim of a ‘demonic West’ that is aiming for nothing less than its disappearance from history.

THE RETURN OF GREAT POWER POLITICS

The scenes from Ukraine played out on our television screens every night look very similar to the grainy black-and-white newsreel photos from the Second World War, with a modern colour technique to bring them to life. When Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia in March 1939, he opened the eyes of the Western powers to the fact that violence had become the governing principle of European political life. As we watch the slow dismantling of Ukrainian society, the destruction

of its infrastructure and economy, we are witnessing what may well turn out to be a ‘system transforming’ war dissolving the last illusions of a stable European order that were too quickly embraced in the immediate post-Cold War euphoria.

Who is to blame? Perhaps we are. One reason for Putin’s risk-taking is that he believed the West was in terminal decline. Obama’s ‘red lines’ were ignored in Syria. Unlike his predecessor, Trump had a strategy to win over Russia, isolate China, avoid Middle East entanglements and scale-down commitments to allies. But this regrettably projected the image of a US that was weaker than it was, and some of the commitments Trump wanted to scale down included membership of NATO. And then there is the European Union, which for too long has indulged in wishful thinking. In 2014 Angela Merkel memorably concluded, after 38 phone calls with Putin, that he was living in another world: ‘I am not sure that he is in touch with reality’ [19]. But she too, was living in a make-believe world of her own. One thinks of the psychologist Eric Erickson and his concept of ‘maladaptive optimism’, whereby the infant fails to acknowledge the bounds of the possible by being unable to register the desires of those around it and their incompatibility with its own. The EU has been in denial for years, telling itself comforting stories about globalisation and global civil society, believing that the Great Powers were permanently tied into a world of human security, hoping that ‘soft’ or ‘smart’ power would trump hard power, even claiming that the minds of dictators like Putin could be changed by argument. But all such arguments were remarkably inattentive to history, or for that matter what was happening outside the Western world.

Indeed, the West has been surprised to find itself largely on its own in this struggle in the Global South. Seventy-five percent of the planet refuses to take sides, and a large percentage support Russia [20]. The explanation, suggests the French anthropologist Emmanuel Todd, is that the West is losing its soft power by turning itself into a laughingstock, with its obsession with transgender rights, same-sex marriages, and its lack of perspective on slavery (the Russians will tell you that the largest number of people ever enslaved were not Africans but Slavs). The non-western world doesn’t find Putin’s anti-LGBT stance objectionable; it still thinks sex is binary; its family structure is still what it was in the western world 30 years ago: patrilineal. As Todd writes, ‘for the collective non-West Russia affirms a reassuring moral conservatism’. We see this conflict as one of political values; much of the rest of the world sees it at a deeper level as one of anthropological values. To which, he adds, it is this unconscious aspect of the divide and this depth that makes the confrontation so historically seminal, and so dangerous. This really is a ‘war of the worlds’ [21].

And so, the war is likely to drag on. The unqualified Ukrainian victory for which the West is rooting looks doubtful. Any negotiated settlement will simply create another frozen conflict which can be unfrozen at a time that suits Moscow. Russia will remain a spoiler, a permanent threat to neighbours like the Baltic republics, Moldova and Georgia. The likelihood is that we will be confronted with chaos. It’s not something that the West likes. It doesn’t do frozen conflicts; it tries to resolve crises; it likes order, but the Russians really don’t. Additionally, they don’t have the power of China to re-order it as they might wish. At the Valdai conference in 2021 Putin emerged from his self-exile in the Kremlin and waxed lyrical. He claimed that the Covid pandemic has revealed that life is fragile and unpredictable, that the international system is open to chaos all the time, and that liberal societies refuse to accept that war is a permanent condition of life. Chaos, not stability, is the international norm. Both Russia and China had grasped history’s rules of engagement, which is why the future is theirs.

Ironically, Cold Warriors, like the author, must acknowledge that we miss the old enemy, the Soviet Union. The USSR promised order, a socialist one, of course; it even held out the vision of eternal peace, the brotherhood of the proletariat, the Socialist International. Putin’s worldview is very different. The world is a Wild West, where the strong rule and the weak know their place. That is just the way it is. The challenge we face in the next few years is to prove that this is the way it isn’t.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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