

PROPAGANDA AND POSTHEROISM IN RUSSIA'S INVASION OF UKRAINE. A MEDITATION AROUND CONFLICT AS AN IMAGINED COMMUNITY

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Abstract. *The post Cold War euphoria pervaded also strategic studies with the belief that future wars will be waged in a postheroic manner, to take Edward Luttwak's famous catchphrase- technological intensive and almost cost free in human lives, they hailed the promise of delivering swift victories for industrialized nations. Our article issues a critique based on the sociology of Émile Durkheim and Georg Simmel and embeds postheroism in a wider notion called "war as an imagined community" arguing that postheroic operations work to the extent they are limited and cover in a solid narrative, both for the international community as well as for the impatient home public. The case studied here is the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war started in February 2022.*

Keywords: *Russia, Ukraine, postheroic warfare, imagined community*

Most reflections on warfare look at it as a dramatic deviation from peace which is considered to be de facto default condition of humankind; an anti-social endeavor which destroys the collective fabric and not an alternative way of socialization. Given the statement above, if we are to take it as premises, conflicts not only tear people apart, but they also bring them together albeit in a counterintuitive manner. Such result would not be possible in the first place absent mass organisation. Whereas the hobbesian state of nature arrests people in a forever brownian status, warfare means well-organised enterprises pitted together against others similar. It does not matter whether we speak about tribes, kingdoms, modern nation-states, or transcontinental empires, warfare ambivalently captures human action bouncing between solidarity and adversity.

Borrowing and paraphrasing Benedict Anderson's now classical dictum according to which nations are imagined communities, present article will use a similar argument to describe the nature of warfare with a focus on contemporary landscape.

A corollary to the aforementioned statement is that, just like the nationbuilding process requires myth making, propaganda, and public communication, so war as imagined community combines actual fighting with projecting and maintaining an aura of legitimacy and invincibility, so that each actor might mobilise its own camp and at the same time attract allies by vilifying the enemy. An interesting consequence is that, given the contemporary public reluctance to support the heavy costs of military operations, armed forces need quick victories with as little casualties as possible. Technology fosters the illusion that unequivocal results are thus possible without boots on the ground or long term logistics. In clausewitzian terms, operations executed in a digital age tend to be absolute but

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not total. In order to remain popular, governments tend to keep efforts at a minimum absent massive mobilisation.

Methodologically speaking, the notion of warfare as imagined community has two aims:

1. To bring closer in a more intimate dialogue strategic studies with social sciences through protagonists like Carl von Clausewitz, Émile Durkheim, Georg Simmel, Marshall McLuhan, and Benedict Anderson.
2. To issue a critique towards Edward Luttwak's postheroic warfare and argue that this is dangerous premises to be employed as mental framework by contemporary armed forces.

The case study chosen is the ongoing conflict between Ukraine and the Russian Federation and the manner in which on ground fighting is doubled by a game of propaganda and counterpropaganda.

The structure of this essay is triple. The first chapter grapples with the capacity of recent technologies to provide a filtered, selective, frequently doctored image of reality based on the sociology of Émile Durkheim and Georg Simmel. The second dwells upon the role of myth making in human conflicts whereas the third orbits around the ongoing Russian invasion against Ukraine and the symbols employed by each side to spin the interpretation of the events in one's favor.

I. Progress and the capability to select personal reality

The progress of humankind, to the extent one can validly talk about it, can be interpreted as the growing capability to modify reality, both one's private reality, but as well reality as a collective, political project. To the extent that our technological means along with economic resources have grown, reality is less and less viewed as a noun, a given or a question of fatality and more and more as a verb, as in the ability <to realise> something.

Ironic as it is, Enlightenment pushed forward progress as a new form of fatality, an imperative to constantly change things in order to go to a presumable better state. "One cannot go against progress" reveals this obligation to frequently adapt and update. Within this logic modernity becomes a question of modality, a state or improvisation beset to change whenever something more appropriate appears on the horizon.

Philosophical systems written by William Paley, Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, Goethe or Friedrich Hegel and Karl Marx enshrined progress as a constant explained in either theological or materialistic terms.

In an effort to explain the evolution of modernity Émile Durkheim identified division of labor as the main theme. His argument goes that the red thread of human history is the ever deepening specialization. At first, the tribal stage was marked but what he called *mechanic solidarity*. That age was beset by the lack of specialisation, each member having the same skills and performing almost the same tasks as anyone else. Later on, narrowing specialty created what Durkheim called *organic solidarity* when each member of a given group is embedded in interdependence. He or she depends on the craft of the others and is depended upon living in intercourse of reciprocity. At the psychological level, division of labor correlates with enhanced intelligence and a stronger self consciousness- individuals step up to mature as persons. Even though Durkheim's later work dwells upon other matters, putting together *On suicide* (1897) and the *Origins of religious forms* (1912) help us to understand the Durkheimian notion of *anomie*- the condition of instability resulting from a breakdown of standards and values or from a lack of purpose or ideals (Britannica).

Published at the very end of the XIX century, On suicide compiles the statistics available at that time and goes beyond them in order to explain the social causes of self harm. Durkheimian account finds *anomie* the main culprit for suicide- a stasis of estrangement due to the lack of rules or the breaking of collective bonds. Absent those and individuals end up in malevolence. Pieced together with the conclusion in *Division du travail*, one can notice a contradiction within the Durkheimian oeuvre- either division of labor strengthens the social fabric, either it fosters anomie! A reasonable conclusion should state that the aforementioned division of labor does not foster a win-win situation but a social environment where some are integrated and benefit, whereas others are tossed aside to experience anomie along with a string of shortcomings. Putting Georg Simmel in dialogue with Durkheim (Bentley, 1926: 250-256) we reach a more realistic portrait of industrialised modern world made up not of a single body, but of many smaller groups (Simmel, 1910: 372-391). Simmel's account completes Durkheim's by stressing how individuals try to preserve their mental sanity in an ever more urbanized setting where money dissolve traditions (Holt, Searls, 1994: 65-69; Dodd, 2012: 146-176; Coeckelbergh, 2015: 258-280) and the bustling rhythm of life overwhelms the senses (Simmel, 1903). Both of them anticipate Benedict Anderson's description of nation as an *imagined community* (Anderson, 2016). If we hold this image to be true, then the feeling of belonging does not come naturally, is not a given, but something that must be created and maintained by an authority. National literature, the system of public education, periodic holidays, banks issuing currencies, tribunals and habeas corpus broadcast the feeling of the "political We" with all the derivative rights and obligations.

Call this set of measures mass culturalisation, indoctrination or whichever you like, one witnesses here the process of politically reenchanting the world. In reverse to what Max Weber, contemporary with both Durkheim and Simmel called "disenchantment of the world", industrial humanity, who never really and entirely abandoned religion, repaints old gods or erects on the pedestal new ones dressed in the garb of science (like the State, free market, infinite progress, racial purity, proletarian revolution or nation itself and carbon-zero footprint in recent times). Back to Durkheim and to his last major book, "Original forms of religious life" (Durkheim, 1912; 1995) we can meditate about the universality and scale of totemisation brought forth by technological means. Trying to figure out his three major books in a system, we can ask whether anomie is the greatest single ontological issue of modernity (Glazer, 1947; Bulmahn, 2000) and which all ambitious political project of the XX (liberalism, corporatism, communism and fascism or the economy of communion stemmed from the Catholic Church) tried to solve it one way or another!

The consequence of totemisation of the abovementioned referentials (state, free market, nations and so forth) was the rising expectations at all levels. Governments promise to erase poverty and create a: middle class affluent society (as in the case of Western advanced democracies), classless society riddled of backwardness heaving the pretence of a terrestrial paradise (as in the case of communism), Aryan dominated world purged of racial rivals (Nazi fantasy) was mirrored by the public growing demand for higher salaries, longer spare time, more consumerist choices on the market all embedded in costless security and environmental friendly development.

Whereas in the first half of the XX century hubris-like quest for perfection sported a top-down hierarchical society as individuals were embedded in massive national projects, today mass enterprises have a more down-top of peer-to-peer character → We, contemporary people no longer believe in political utopias, therefore we retreat in personal bubbles and customise the surroundings to a beautiful, if not flawless canvass. Embellished

resumes bedecked with grossly exaggerated or even absent merits (Hauptman, 2011: 171-173), social-media photoshopped lives and bodies (MacCallum, Widdows, 2018: 235-245), PR campaigns and country brands or esthetic surgery spell the high standards of a Weltanschauung that no longer accepts failure, powerlessness, old age and even death itself. Pushing forth Durkheimian conclusions about the division of work, one can witness a differentiation not only between different daily tasks performed by individuals or different material products or services they labor, but between our different postures (citizens or workers). We witness today in complex capitalist societies (Western or non-Western, authoritarian or democratic) a certain autonomy between the political dimension of public life and the economic one. Whereas on the economic realm people are pushed to have a job and perform well there in order to secure their finance and maintain daily lifestyles, as citizens they enjoy a selective relationship with the political (they can be active as social militants, become members of NGOs, attend strikes, vote or they may very well remain passive to all the above focusing on their private sphere). We would call this flexible public engagement as *solipdarity* (a combination of solidarity and solipsism). Here we have a noun describing the manner of being both together and also solitary, on our own. We perform different tasks together so as to assure the daily bread, but we tend to live our dreams alone in autarchic intimacy. In the echo-chambers of one's making, many contemporary humans customise their perfect microuniverses or surround themselves so as to repeatedly confirm their biases. President's Obama farewell speech where he warned against living in one's own bubble¹ or Neil De Grasse Tyson statement that Internet is the greatest confirmation machine (Tyson, 09 Feb 2020; Tyson, 21 April 2020)² are evocative in this sense.

1.1. Grappling with postheroic warfare as notion and reality

The aftermath of the Second World War was marked by two ideological opposing blocks, decolonisation and the advent of nuclear era which marked a certain division of labor with regard to waging battles. At the top tier of the international system great powers of the day (with US and USSR in the front row and Great Britain, France, and China in the second one) acknowledged the existential perils of a nuclear clash and developed sophisticated procedures to avoid doomsday one ticket scenarios relegating real conflicts to small powers. Leaving aside high pressure moments like the Cuban missile crisis or the Sino-Soviet border tension on the Ussuri river, Cold War became hot in places like Korean Peninsula, Vietnam, Angola, Czechoslovakia, Afghanistan across the 1980s and so forth. Mutual Assured Destruction remained the paramount strategic notion modulating the compromise between combat eagerness and prudence. With the advent of electronic era, a

1 See the original text: "And that's not easy to do. For too many of us, it's become safer to retreat into our own bubbles, whether in our neighborhoods or on college campuses, or places of worship, or especially our social media feeds, surrounded by people who look like us and share the same political outlook and never challenge our assumptions. The rise of naked partisanship, and increasing economic and regional stratification, the splintering of our media into a channel for every taste — all this makes this great sorting seem natural, even inevitable. And increasingly, we become so secure in our bubbles that we start accepting only information, whether it's true or not, that fits our opinions, instead of basing our opinions on the evidence that is out there." (Obama, January 10, 2017)

2 Neil de Grasse Tyson, Twitter, 09 Feb 2020,

<https://twitter.com/neiltyson/status/1226279257049051141> (last accessed September 29, 2022)

Neil deGrasse Tyson, Search Engines and Conformation Bias, Youtube, 21 April 2020,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f1_RX8rWaRg (last accessed September 29, 2022;

new generation of martial instruments became available with the promise to: 1) make MAD obsolete, and 2) wage remote conflicts with little to no casualties for one's part. US famous SDI- Strategic Defense Initiative popularly known as Star Wars was projected to make US and NATO homelands invulnerable to any potential Soviet ballistic threat. Even though SDI proved an expensive multibillion extravaganza with approximate results in bringing the Soviet War to the end and pressuring USSR to finally implode, its underpinning philosophy spilled over the next phase called RMA- Revolution in Military Affairs. Whereas SDI remained a top-down approach, RMA's promise was to apply information capabilities to expand the terrain awareness, cut the waste implied in search and destroy missions and finally make the war a surgical laparoscopic enterprise, at least for US and other Western affluent countries. RMA was successfully applied during the First Gulf War against Saddam Hussein and afterwards embedded in different small scale military interventions during the 1990s but at the same time wedded to a reluctance to intervene with troops on the grounds and tolerate casualties. Such was the advent of the postheroic warfare how Edward Luttwak baptised it (Luttwak, May/June 1995; Luttwak, 1999: 127-139). Made up of high technological means and casualty avoidance, the notion and its reality seemed appropriate for a decade dominated by the CNN effect (Gilboa, 2005: 27-44). In the globalising world of the 1990s where atrocities were brought forth very quickly for a Western public with higher moral standards but at the same time unwilling to spend too much on security or engaging in crusades beyond the defensive national interest. In his interpretation, Luttwak explains UN or NATO slow and modest effort to stop the disintegration of Yugoslavia and Somalia by the fact that Cold War tradition created large bureaucratic military organisation with mostly theoretical capabilities and arsenals but with poor combat experience (Luttwak, 1999: 127-139). When MAD was no longer usable in the post 1990s world witnessing civil conflicts, remote air intervention became the solution satisfying both UN requirements and CNN global public.

2. The role and the risks of propaganda in conflicts

It is a truism that since the most ancient times, signaling was part of human conflicts and remained so, improved with each technological update. In a simpler fashion of putting it, signaling means basically two things: camouflage and propaganda. The former aims deterring the distinction between you and your surroundings. Using the parlance of communication science, camouflage cloaks one's presence in the noise. The latter, propaganda performs a dual mission: strengthening the moral of your own side and your allies and at the same time lowering the one of your opponents.

Employing once again the Durkheimian prose, *propaganda should totemise or de-totemise certain symbols in order to increase the solidarity within your own ranks and in the opposite direction, to increase the anomie of the adversarial side.*

The evolution of propaganda varied and was correlated to the conception of warfare. Thus, in Middle Ages, both within Christianity and Islam conflicts were justified in religious terms, whereas at the onset of modernity the same phenomenon adopted the language of state reason/ *raison d'état* and gave its loyalty towards nation as referential (even though religion was never really erased). In the same line, at the beginning of the XX century, with the success of social Darwinism, mass mobilisation was hailed as a form of hygiene, potential slaughter was spun as the supreme trial meant to separate weed from chaff in terms of gens and help breath a superior humankind. The litany of warfare hailed its advent as a medicine against laziness, idleness and materialistic hedonism. However, even though nationalism and imperialism still rung the bell for marches, after the carnage of First World

War, people entered a deep soul-searching about what went so terribly wrong. In this regard, initiatives like Briand-Kellogg Pact (1928), the Society of Nations and its successor, UN translated the liberal optimism that war can if not silenced forever than limited by international norms and arbitrage checked by arbitration. No longer a desirable outcome or an extreme sport for the nations, warfare was deemed an anomaly as can be noticed even at semantic level. The fact the war ministries morphed into defense ministries or that 'security' emerged as a buzzword different from power and endowed with milder connotations. Present day propaganda learned those lessons and refashioned messages so as to embed moralistic claims and defensive rationale (Leucea, Popescu, 2019: 88-105). No one starts a fight any longer by invoking his nude power play or the will of God.

At the same time, seen as a division of labor, warfare varied across millennia. There have been periods when all members of a community attended hunting or martial activities followed by other when warfare was restricted to a limited number.

Middle Ages, Renaissance and present times fall within the first type, whereas XIX-XX centuries featuring mass enrollment (*levée en masse*) fall within the second. The relative delegitimation of armed violence was correlated to technological breakthrough in producing the postheroic phenomenon – a way of combat not by sacrificing your own troops but by consuming the latest technical paraphernalia (drones, intelligence rockets, nanobots) able to strike only armed enemies and avoid civilians and other unnecessary casualties or damages (Luttwak, May/June 1995; Luttwak, 1999: 127-139; Castillo, 2017). Adding to all of the above the control of information and the hygienisation of language, battlefield seems something virtual, ethereal, feeling that prompted Jean Baudrillard to say the Gulf War never really took place (Baudrillard, 1991) or others to speak about virtual (Ignatieff, 2001) or virtuous warfare (Der Derian, 2000: 771-788). Such hygienisation of carnage remains of course an illusion, but we should see it as a part of the quest of perfection that stems from our *Weltanschauung*. If the logic we have just charted is plausible, then we might conceive conflict as an imagined community where the immediacy of armed struggle is covered and thus mediated by an informational sphere which restricts what is shown and what is hidden according to the interests, proclivity or ideological bias of the public (or people within the public). Summing up, we therefore define *war as an institution which remakes social intercourse according to the enmity of the actors involved using lethal means*.³

Less pursued as a research subject is the question of autopropaganda- action through which an actor (political, military or social) comes to believe the very messages he/she sent to fool the adversary. Thus, the aforementioned actor become the victim of his/her own narrative out of the need to maintain public support. I.e. Individual or group psychology are the more important in authoritarian regimes the more objective bureaucracy or unbiased counselling are dismissed and the regime evolves into a gigantic machine of confirming its premises. Pace Karl Popper, we are dealing here with an effort to fortify yourself against any falsification- a must if one desires science and knowledge to progress, according to the Austrian-born philosopher.

By using the instruments of evolutionist biology, authors Shankar Vedantam and Bill Mesler explain the functioning of the human brain in the fashion below:

"Our eyes and brain are not in the truth business; they are in the functionality business, and it turns out that discarding nine hundred and ninety-nine million, nine hundred

³ By institution we have in mind the sociological meaning of a stable and durable set of rules. Common parlance confuses institutions and organisations, frequently submitting the former to the later.

and ninety-nine thousand, nine hundred and sixty bits of data out of every billion is extremely functional.

What happens with visual information also happens in nearly every part of our mental lives. We think we are seeing, hearing and processing the truth, but we often are not. As with our eyes, it turns out there are excellent reasons to prioritize functionality over reality in every domain. Yes, this means you miss the truth, but it gets you to the real goal: Your brain has been designed to help you survive, to forage for opportunities, to get along with mates and friends, to raise offspring to adulthood, and to avoid feelings of existential despair. From the perspective of evolution, objective truth is not only not the goal, it is not even the only path to the goal.” (Vedantam, Mesler, 2020: 13)

When we are dealing with a ruler or a narcissistic elite, then the appetite for conspiratorial thinking is more at home and there are greater chances to underpin major actions. History teaches many instances when the intense belief in conspiracies weakened different political regimes or even drove them to destruction (Kay, 2021: 104-128). Professor G.R. Berridge lists Third Reich and Nasser's Egypt among examples due to their obsession towards antisemitism and anti-Judaism (Berridge, 2013: 145).

Summing up we move to define *war as imagined community* as a mostly lethal confrontation in which the hostile protagonists aim to rewind the social and political boundaries of an imagined community so as to gather moral support and material resource and deprive the enemy of them.

In a simpler fashion, *war as imagined community* signifies a conflict in which military victory is heavily dependent on success of the imagination⁴ → you win to the extent you sell your narrative and silence the one broadcasted by your rivals.

3. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the making of a global moral community

Russia's postheroic invasion of Ukraine has been building up for years at both factual and narrative levels, although it gained momentum in the last year prior to happening.

At the rhetorical level the *casus belli* should be seen as the latest comer of an older tune which gained more and more weight since Vladimir Putin's earlier years when the revision of history unfolded along with his consolidation of the power vertical. Operating on the premises that the Fall of the USSR was the greatest 'geopolitical catastrophe of the XX century', the Russian president embarked on a quest to rewire the then state of historiography which he considered too defeatist and in need of a triumphalist revamping. Adding an ideological twist to his and his KGB colleagues grip on power, Russian president together with Sergey Nariskin, Serghey Shoigu surrounded by a plethora of friendly historians and like-minded journalists aimed to exalt Russian Orthodox slavophile identity and catapult it against the West depicted as geopolitical hegemonic and morally corrupt.

Justifying Kremlin pretence towards her neighbors, writers such as Aleksandr Dughin (Dughin, 27 martie 2016) and Serghei Karaganov (Karaganov, 2018:85-93) articulated a geopolitical perspective based on civilization and not anymore on the Westphalian nation-state protected by the legality of sovereignty (Suslov, 2012: 575-595). Dughinian lecture envisioned Russia as the core of Slavic civilization and thus with the right to dominate and protect satellite neighbor state especially those with Russian minorities. Even though Dughin mystique is grossly exaggerated in the Western media and his influence over the Russian elites more of a hype (Laruelle: 16 March 2022), Putin two

⁴ Imagination which must be fed with certain selected images.

speeches prior to the invasion are largely consonant to Dughinian vision. Next we shall set our attention towards them. The one from 22 February talks about the importance of Ukraine for Russian national interest while the other broadcast in the very eve of the invasion on 24 February explains the perils of NATO expansion. Both of them an hour long, they can be considered the subject and the predicative of the matter- the first goes to the essence and describes the state of fact, whereas latter tells the audition what action should be taken.

Starting with the statement that "the situation in Donbas has reached a critical, acute stage" Putin moves *ex abruptum* to the core of the matter which is the importance of Ukraine: "I would like to emphasise again that Ukraine is not just a neighbouring country for us. It is an inalienable part of our own history, culture and spiritual space. These are our comrades, those dearest to us – not only colleagues, friends and people who once served together, but also relatives, people bound by blood, by family ties.

Since time immemorial, the people living in the south-west of what has historically been Russian land have called themselves Russians and Orthodox Christians. This was the case before the 17th century, when a portion of this territory rejoined the Russian state, and after.

"From then on, the televised historical schooling about the ethnical and cultural intimation between Russians and Ukrainians and how in the very aftermath of the Russian Revolution Lenin created Ukrainian statehood by giving away Russian traditional land:

"So, I will start with the fact that modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia or, to be more precise, by the Bolshevik, Communist Russia. This process started practically right after the 1917 revolution, and Lenin and his associates did it in a way that was extremely harsh on Russia – by separating, severing what is historically Russian land. Nobody asked the millions of people living there what they thought."

Russian friendship towards Kiev extended even after the Soviet demise, Moscow, even though weary from defeat shouldered alone the debts of former USSR and provided assistance to her neighbors:

"Despite all these injustices, lies and outright pillage of Russia, it was our people who accepted the new geopolitical reality that took shape after the dissolution of the USSR, and recognized the new independent states. Not only did Russia recognise these countries, but helped its CIS partners, even though it faced a very dire situation itself. This included our Ukrainian colleagues, who turned to us for financial support many times from the very moment they declared independence. Our country provided this assistance while respecting Ukraine's dignity and sovereignty." (President of Russia: February 21, 2022)

Ungrateful of Moscow's extra mile generosity, Ukraine is snubbed as "it was striking how the Ukrainian authorities always preferred dealing with Russia in a way that ensured that they enjoy all the rights and privileges while remaining free from any obligation. The officials in Kiev replaced partnership with a parasitic attitude acting at times in an extremely brash manner. Suffice it to recall the continuous blackmail on energy transits and the fact that they literally stole gas." (President of Russia: February 21, 2022)

Careful to draw a wedge between people, the average Ukrainian and "the Ukrainian authorities – I would like to emphasize this – began by building their statehood on the negation of everything that united us, trying to distort the mentality and historical memory of millions of people, of entire generations living in Ukraine. It is not surprising that Ukrainian society was faced with the rise of far-right nationalism, which rapidly

developed into aggressive Russophobia and neo-Nazism.” (President of Russia: February 21, 2022)

Forasmuch as the 21 February speech focused on the bilateral relations between two Slavic countries, the one on 24 February described Russia's place within the global hierarchy of power. Using the situation in Donbas as pretext, Russian president went further on to describing and simultaneously decrying a world of Realpolitik where international rights do not possess any validity unless sustained by might:

”Anything that does not suit the dominant state, the powers that be, is denounced as archaic, obsolete and useless. At the same time, everything it regards as useful is presented as the ultimate truth and forced on others regardless of the cost, abusively and by any means available. Those who refuse to comply are subjected to strong-arm tactics.

Taking advantage of USSR weakening in the late 1980s, the North Atlantic alliance continued to expand despite Russian protests and concerns”.

To back this logic, several examples are given starting with the 1999 bombing campaign against Serbia and continuing with Iraq, Libya and Syria. Instead of a better world order, America's footprint created havoc and **never(m)ending anarchy**:

”As a result we see a tremendous loss in human life, damage, destruction, and a colossal upsurge of terrorism.

Overall, it appears that nearly everywhere, in many regions of the world where the United States brought its law and order, this created bloody, non-healing wounds and the curse of international terrorism and extremism. I have only mentioned the most glaring but far from only examples of disregard for international law.” (President of Russia, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts>)

Western incessant bullying is contrasted with Russian patience and bonafide:

”To reiterate: they have deceived us, or, to put it simply, they have played us. Sure, one often hears that politics is a dirty business. It could be, but it shouldn't be as dirty as it is now, not to such an extent. This type of con-artist behaviour is contrary not only to the principles of international relations but also and above all to the generally accepted norms of morality and ethics. Where is justice and truth here? Just lies and hypocrisy all around.” (President of Russia, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts>)

Going back and forth between global and regional levels of analysis, Vladimir Putin turns his indictment against contemporary Ukraine, deemed an “anti-Russia” ruled by pro-Western crony oligarch and neo-Nazi paramilitary groups nonrepresentative for the majority of enslaved Ukrainians. While he conjures the iconography of fascism and recounts 1941 as pivotal moment of Hitlerite Germany attacking USSR and the beginning of the Great Patriot War, the listener is compelled to see the analogy between past times and contemporary perils.

So as to mitigate the repetition of doom, Russian president announces it had just authorised a ”special operation” to protect the separatist republics of Lugansk and Donbas and at the same time denazify Ukraine.

By placing Russia as the victim of US and NATO's eastward expansion and at the same time announcing a <special operation> and not a full scale war that would engage the effort of every citizen, the regime tried to fortify its moral position and at the same time assure the public that it has everything under control (a special operation is more like a police job and employ a modest array of means, both in humans and materials). The belief that ambitious external goals can be achieved with little resource in a small amount of time proved to be a mistake made by several great powers during the course of history. Germany

in 1914, the same country under another regime in 1939, USSR in Afghanistan in 1979 as well as US in Vietnam and later in the war on terrorism in Afghanistan, at least in the first phase.

After the unfolding of the attacks, a massive rally staged in Moscow March 19 2022 provided the opportunity for another speech in which Vladimir Putin repeated the claim that military intervention was meant "to get people out of their misery, out of this genocide, that is the main reason, the motive and purpose of the military operation that we began in Donbas and Ukraine". Adorning his argument with a Biblical paraphrase –" 'There is no greater love than if someone gives his soul for his friends' "he exalted national unity (Dyxon: March 18, 2022).

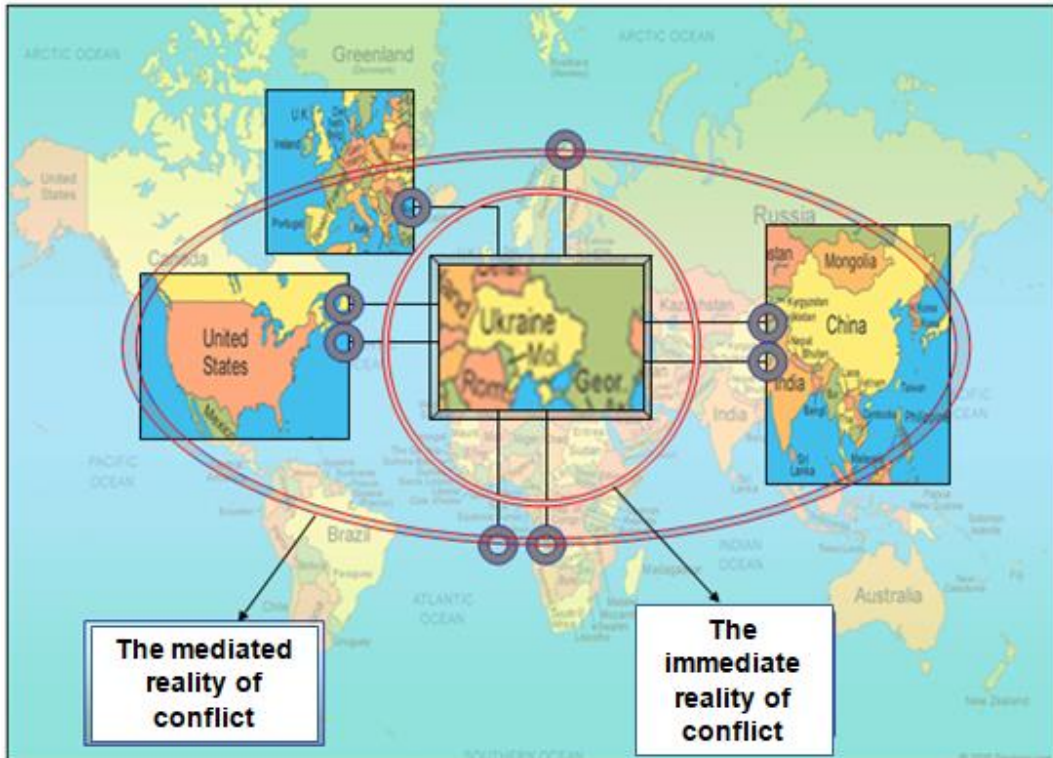


Figure 1. Multicentric interpretative model of warfare

Source: Author's editing using the site: Geology.com, <https://geology.com/world/world-map.shtml>

Russia's invasion of Ukraine represents the latent evolution of the 2014 ongoing conflict between the two countries, and which is set, according to some as the foreground of a New Cold War.

The way it was justified by Vladimir Putin correlates with the preparedness of Russian troops and their allies providing a case to reflect on the unfolding of the postheroic warfare.

3.1. Ukraine propagandistic spin

Provincial if compared to Russia but dwarfing even large European countries, Ukraine is one of the main heirs of the former USSR. Since 1992 onwards, Ukraine experienced many tribulations similar to Russian Federation, its painful soulsearching

rendered postcommunist transition a question of transaction between East and West. Occupying the faultline between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, Ukraine displayed many of the shortcomings of other East European nations: weak government, inchoate rule of law, high degree of corruption correlated with social polarisation and rampant inequalities. As Ukrainian pro Western elites made inroads towards NATO and the EU, Kremlin felt its neighbour was steadily becoming an 'anti-Russia' to quote Vladimir Putin's remark. In 2014 Crimea's annexation after a façade referendum, the flight of the pro-Russian former president Viktor Yanukovych and the break out of Euromaidan brought instability in Eastern Europe and inched Kremlin and the West closer to another Cold War. In geopolitical lexicon, Ukraine represents the *Mittelpunkt* or cradle of Eastern Slavs and Ukraine "the Mother of all cities" to repeat an emotional charged dictum (Trenin: 21.03.2018; Shlapentokh: 08 September 2021; Trenin: 10.09.2021).

Blessed with an array of qualities that make her desired both by the West as well as the East (surface, heavy industry, strategic position, a large diaspora scattered several countries), and after having lost Crimea, Ukraine did not find hard to sell her case as an embattled victim. Even though outnumbered and outgunned, Ukrainian armed forces are fighting to defend their homeland with a morale and level of preparedness significantly superior to the situation back in 2014, thus presenting themselves not only with a just cause, but also with reasonably winning chances. Ukraine's propagandistic struggle displays at least two levels which we consider here: the effort of the elites entered around the president; the grass root level which have as protagonists the armed forces or ordinary citizens.

3.1.1. The presidential gambit. Backed by the factors above, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky embarked on a serial discourses spree to win the international public. Speech after speech, delivered online and dressed in the same combat fatigue and passionate demeneavour, Zelensky's stubbornness transformed him from a political lightweight to a respected wartime figure. From refusing John Biden's offer to escape the country to his mobile Phone delivered live where he assured Ukrainians of his determination or Western European leaders about his probable assassination to posing with his wife for Vogue Magazine, we have here the ingredients of a succesul charm offensive (Breuer: 07.06.2022; Donadio: 26 July, 2022; Ward: 15 September 2022).

In order to jolt out of neutrality different countries, Zelensky made his habit of delivering speeches on the weekly basis, each of them no more than half an hour and with short sentences and Churchillian enumeration so as to arouse emotional reactions (PA Media: 8 March 2022; Federal News Service: March 16, 2022; Zelenskyy: 04 April 2022).

3.1.2. The armed forces gambit. By covering its <special operation> with a halo of legitimising arguments for both the internal as well as the international public, the Russian elites hoped to attain a hygienic relatively costless victory of Kiev, one that could later be exploited in parades and history books. It would be long until the cruel reality of warfare would penetrate the bubble so as to show how armed forces were actually waging a full scale enterprise mirrored in stalemate due to several factors such as: 1) Ukrainian heavy resistance backed by the West; 2) the failure of Russian intelligence which seemingly provided false hopes (Foy and Rathborne: March 1 2022; Standish: 08, May, 2022); 3) poor logistics caused by the same faith in a swift victory; 4) demoralised Russian soldiers who cried their bewilderment and despair in emails of phone conversations sent back home (Euronews: 31/03/2022; Siobhán O'Grady and Galouchka: September 15, 2022).

Ukrainians quickly seized the opportunity to exploit such facts in order to: a) show the world the cruel behavior of Russian forces (namely massacres in Bucha, Irpin, Mariupol

and others) (Wright: 13 April 2022; Ksariuk: April 28, 2022; Niland: 24 May 2022; Khara: 16 August 2022).

After a few months of fighting rearguard battles, Ukrainians unfolded two offensives, one begun in late July 2022 in the southern territories, and the second in north-eastern part of the country took by storm Russian opponents and pushed them back in disarray, thus breaking not only the front but the initial pretense that Ukraine and her political leadership could have been taken out with only a postheroic effort (Foy, Joiner, Nevitt: September 28, 2022; Terajima: October 7, 2022)

Using the Durkheimian terminology we can say that the efforts made by the Ukrainians, at presidential level and otherwise aim towards totemisation of Ukraine's cause so as to rally worldwide support and boycott the enemy.

3.1.3. Worldwide reaction. Postheroism and moral attitude

In a digital-flath-earth each major event acquire a global status. Instant communications, the existence of international organisations, NGOs and the moral awakening of public opinion assure that nothing of scale remains a forgotten island. Such is also the case for humanitarian crisis or regional wars. Even though most of them happen under the atomic threshold, each side engages in media campaigns to minimise enemy threat and attract funds or sympathy. The higher the stakes involved like religion or nationalism the wider is the engagement to the extent that contemporary wars become imagined communities to paraphrase a notion employed by Benedict Anderson to depict de reality of nation.

For that fact, the site Bellingcat created a Russia-Ukraine Monitor Map which is a crowdsourcer map compiling intelligence about troops mobilisation, drone attacks, civilian casualties and so on:

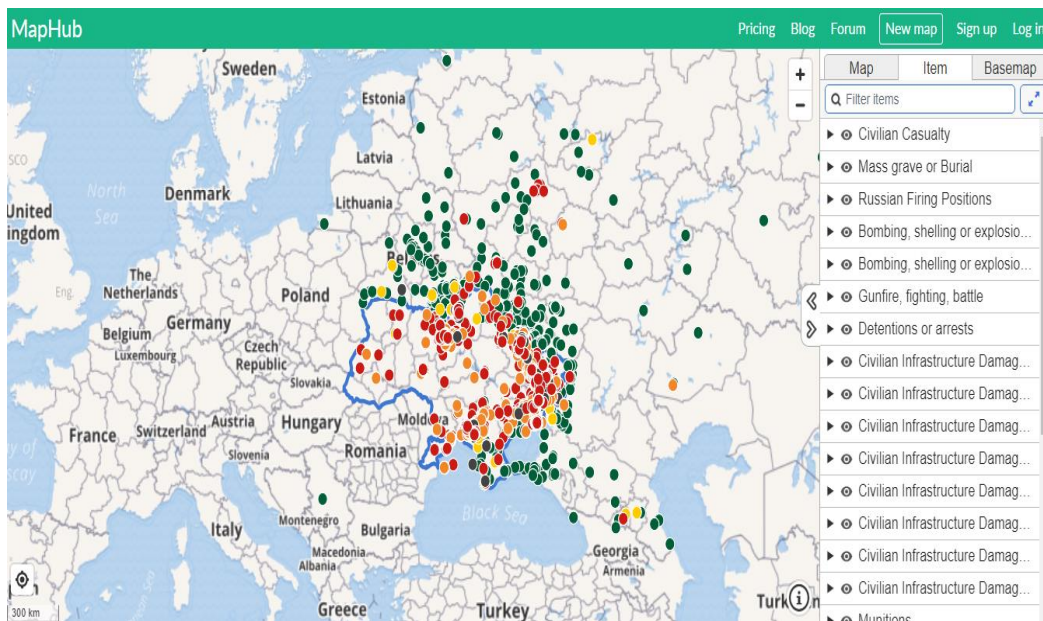


Figure 2 Bellingcat's crowdsourced depiction of Russian-Ukraine fightings

Source: Bellingcat, <https://maphub.net/Cen4infoRes/russian-ukraine-monitor> (last accessed October 11, 2022)

The planetary radius of the conflict as imaginary community impacts the plant on at least three levels: a) political and military; b) economic and food security; c) morally and esthetically.

A world divided

Government responses to the war in Ukraine
March 2022

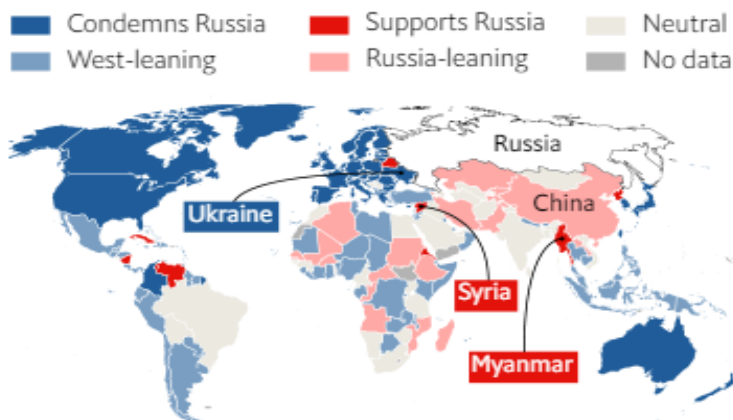


Figure 3. Divided loyalties in Russia-Ukraine armed conflict

Source: The Economist, Who are Russia's supporters? 04 April 2022

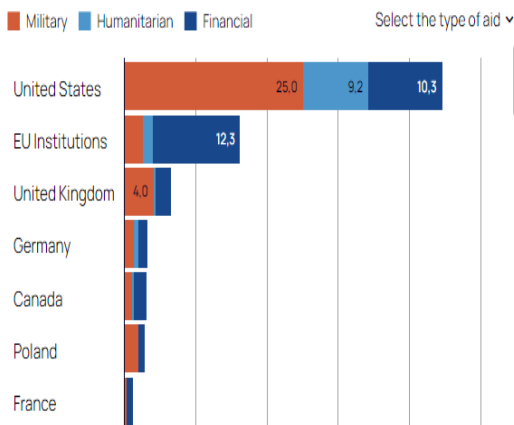
A. The effect of Russia's attack in Ukraine is felt and interpreted differently according to the sympathy the rest of the world bestows on each side. Thus, according to Economist Intelligence Unit, Western and Anglo-Saxon countries lean towards the Ukrainian cause, whereas poorer and developing or authoritarian countries tend to be pro-Russian:

Therefore the war divides the world on two axes: East-West, North-South with a third one pitting democracies against dictatorships. The hostilities are largely waged between Russia and the Western backed Ukraine using two instruments correspondent to the postheroic warfare, namely: economic sanctions and delivery of military equipment along with ammunition. International sanctions imposed by US, UE and other countries targeted an array of items like high-profile individuals, financial assets and imports of different goods. More so, several Russian banks have been cut off from the international SWIFT system. According to a compilation of different data, sanctions are credited to have produced Russia's economy an inflation growth of 17.1%, a car sales reduction of more than 83% and a 30% GDP fall as of May 2022 (BBC: 30 September 2022) ((BBC, 30 September 2022).

Along with anti-Russian came along the aid for Ukraine:

Government support to Ukraine: Type of assistance, € billion

Commitments Jan. 24 to Aug. 3, 2022. Data on 41 donors; scroll to see more donors



Government support to Ukraine: By donor country GDP, incl. and excl. EU share

Commitments Jan. 24 to Aug. 3, 2022. Data on 40 donor countries; scroll to see more countries

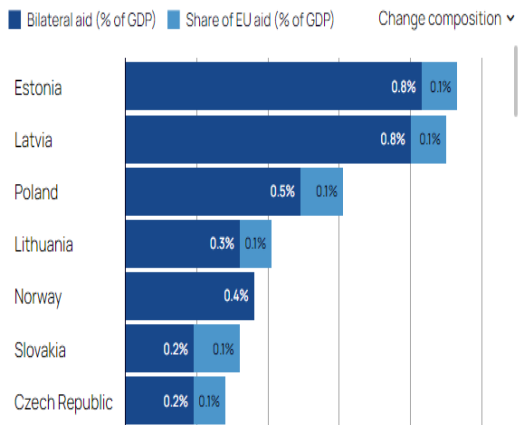


Figure 4. European financial commitment towards Ukraine

Source: Ukraine Support Tracker. Kiel Institute for World Economy, <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/?cookieLevel=not-set> (last accessed October 16, 2022)

In Durkheimian sense, we are witnessing here a concerted effort to cement the solidarity of the international society so as to back Ukraine and push Russia towards greater anomie!

B. In terms of economy and food security, the war between Ukraine and the Russian Federation is a disruptive event as both enemies are massive producer of wheat, barley, sunflower-seed and other agricultural products:

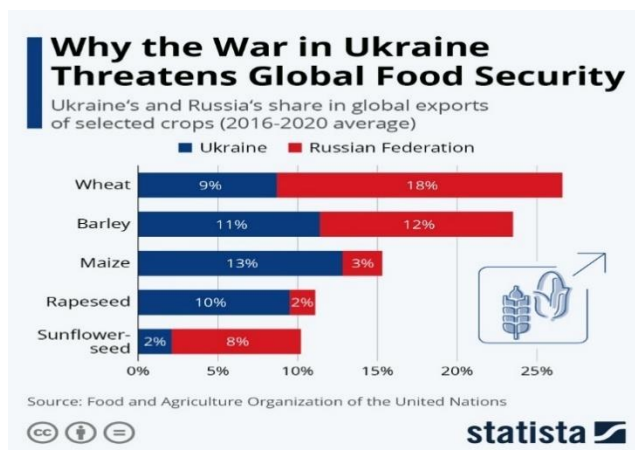


Figure 5 Impact of war in Ukraine on global food security

Source: Felix Richter, Why the War in Ukraine Threatens Global Food Security, *Statista*, April 11, 2022

Or sends ripples that cause the increase price for other items such as crude oil and metals:

Growing pressures

Prices for energy, grains, and metals soared since the invasion of Ukraine, signaling that inflation rates are poised to accelerate.



Source: Bloomberg, USDA, Datastream, and IMF staff calculations.
 Note: *European & US natural gas prices use the Dutch TTF and Henry Hub as proxies, respectively. **Base Metals Price Index includes aluminum, cobalt, copper, iron ore, lead, molybdenum, nickel, tin, uranium, and zinc.



Figure 6. Financial ripples of Russian-Ukraine armed conflict

Source: IMF, <https://www.imf.org/en/Blogs/Articles/2022/03/15/blog-how-war-in-ukraine-is-reverberating-across-worlds-regions-031522>

C. Russian attack against Ukraine started in late February 2022 caused a massive moral outcry across the world and brought millions to the intimacy of a global village. Even

though polarised as we could see in the chart compiled above by the EIU, proUkrainian supporters pushed for what we call here an ontological boycott of Russia. Since the first weeks of the conflict, not only governments but also tech giants and corporate sector supplemented by cultural organisations came in symphony to show their solidarity and ban Russia not only at the government level, but also on cultural terms. For example Facebook, Bolt, Uber, KFC and other came with different initiative for that matter:

Symbols of solidarity towards Ukraine



Figure 7. Restaurant commercial garnering funds for Ukraine in a Bucharest mall
Source: Author's archive. AFI Cotroceni Mall, Bucharest, 14.06.2022



Figure 8. Bolt logo with political connotations

Source: Blog Bolt.eu, <https://blog.bolt.eu/en/bolt-stands-against-invasion-in-ukraine-donates-over-e5m/>



Figure 9. Public transportation display in Malta with support message for Ukraine
Source: Graphic nearby Msida, Malta, May 2022. Author's archive

At the grassroots level ordinary people felt the need to display their stand.



Figure 10. Flag of Ukraine with coat of arms on a wall in Venice
Source: Venice, August 2022. Auhtor's archive⁵

What amazes is the depth of sanctions, as they did not limit themselves to political, military and economic elites in Kremlin, but also target cultural and sport figures were

⁵ It has to be noted that this picture was one of the very few displays of solidarity to Ukraine in Venice. According to a Romanian Phd student who talked to the author while working as presenter for the Ukraine exposition at the Biennale, she considered Venetians to be self-absorbed by domestic matters with few energy towards political events outside their area. Apart from this subjective point of view, the scarcity of displays of solidarity with Ukraine is also correlated with Italy being dependent of Russian gas. (Montanari, May 30, 2022). However, despite the reluctance of Italian industry to cut the ties with Russian supply, Rome made efforts to become independent from Kremlin. (Brambilla, Albanese, September 27, 2022)

banned from attending events. Propaganda worked in the double sense of estheticising politics and politicising the esthetics universe. Valery Gergiev, Anna Netrebko and others faced the consequences of what we just baptised an 'ontological boycott'. Several artists faced the public opprobrium over ties with the Russian president and were threatened with banishment from the international artistic industry if they fail to condemn Kremlin's aggression (Khomami, 1 mar 2022; The Violin Channel, 10 March 2022; Saberi, April 21, 2022; Schwartz, May 27, 2022).

Apart from sanction, the current warfare expanded its scene as imagined community with the contribution of many artists who found the pretext for inspiration. Joan Baez's portrait of Ukrainian acting president Zelensky was sold for 500\$ and the money donated for International Medical Corps (Arnone, Mar 31, 2022). Another example is Dribbble a freelancing platform which hosts among others art condemning the invasion on behalf of the Ukrainian cause (Dribbble.com).

Concluding remarks

Conflict with its most violent form- warfare is far more than a struggle between two parties. It engages many more actors on a stage no longer confined to the battlefield but extending virtually to the whole world. After 1945 the creation of UN, the codification of an international legislation limiting what is morally permissible and globalisation assure that no violent clash remains a parochial matter but draws worldwide attention. Therefore present article argued that military conflicts should be seen as creating communities made out of people, governments, NGOs, media giants which take part of them out of political, economic or humanitarian reasons. Against this background combatants divide their focus between kinetic actions, filtering the news leaked towards domestic public and projecting a justifying image of their behaviour. Maintaining your reputation and at the same time demonising the opponent go hand in hand, as being cast in a positive light both within and beyond your borders provide a steady flow of allies and aid (in the form of money, weapons, ammunition, or safe heavens for your citizens fleeing from peril). Otherwise, a negative light means domestic public no longer support the military effort and international community cuts you off from the aforementioned allies and aid. Aware of the perils correlated with present day conditions, advanced industrial nations tried to wage what has been called since late 1990s a "postheroic war"- a intensive technological style which promised to deliver swift victories and low casualties within one own ranks. However such capability creates another risk, that of rushing towards a blitzkrieg without long term plans, logistic or reserves. The invasion of Russian Federation in Ukraine which started late February 2022 is taken as case study. Coined "special operation" by president Vladimir Putin, the invasion is currently mired in a quagmire which revealed a plethora of shortcomings plaguing Russian armed forces and in the background the political regime: hubris, false intelligence, and widespread corruption. A demoralised army and a reluctant population no longer media isolated is confronted by the Ukrainian defence forces backed by NATO and able to project a triumphant pro domo narrative. At the moment of this writing, Kremlin combines the postheroic offensive with a partial and unpopular draft. Heavy rockets attacks against Kiev and other cities all backed by nuclear threats exhibit a regime no longer trusting that its soldiers can deliver the victory and now concentrates on revenge with the hope that a scorched Ukraine will negotiate if not peace than an indefinite stalemate.

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