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# UKRAINE: PRUDENCE, NOT HOPE STRATEGIC THINKING AND THE USE OF HISTORY

**I**N 2018, I attended a staff ride organised by the British Army as part of ‘Operation Reflect’, the Army’s centenary commemoration of the First World War. At one of the stands, the participants had to conduct a TEWT (Tactical Exercise Without Troops), applying 21st century doctrine to a scenario that was based on a German attack on British troops in 1918. The participants were split into several syndicates, and, as this was an international staff ride, each syndicate had British, US, French and German officers (plus representatives from other nations in smaller numbers). The scenario, briefly sketched out, was as follows: ‘Our’ troops were facing an overwhelming enemy; the troops had taken casualties and were down to

60% in manpower and materiel. The order was to conduct a fighting withdrawal and wait for re-enforcements. With these strengthened forces, the troops were then supposed to go onto the attack and to drive the enemy back.

You might ask why such a scenario is of importance when we talk about the Ukraine today, clearly a different time period and a different geographical location. The answer is this: As I walked around and listened to the discussed courses of action, something dawned on me: In all syndicates, the proposed solutions played out along national lines of tactical and operational understanding. Most nations wanted to do exactly what the orders stated; slow down

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<sup>1</sup>For an in-depth discussion of the importance of the Second World War on current thinking, see Matthias Strohn, ed. *The Long Shadow of World War II. The Legacy of the War and its Impact on Political and Military Thinking Since 1945*, Oxford 2021.

the enemy and wait for the build-up of materiel, before defeating the enemy with overwhelming force. Across the board, the representatives from one nation disagreed. Every German officer came to the same conclusion, which was summed up by one participant of that nation: ‘You all say we only have 60% combat power, I say we still have 60%, so we attack immediately.’ Despite all our NATO doctrine, joint exercises and operations, war and fighting are still seen differently in different nations and armies; there is a (clear) national bias in all of us. National histories play a role here, and these have shaped our thinking and understanding more than we like to admit.<sup>1</sup> And by this I do not only mean recent events, but those stretching far back in history.

In many ways, recent memories can be difficult and sometimes even dangerous when we try to apply them to current affairs. The crisis in the Ukraine cannot be explained with an understanding gained in the sands of Iraq or Afghanistan, including the use and effectiveness of the military. If we do not understand this bias and overcome it, our analysis of the situation on the ground is patchy at best, and wrong at worst. In addition, not only do we need to understand ourselves and our own biases – and those of our allies, but without an understanding of what the opponent thinks, strategic success is difficult to achieve indeed.

The social media platforms are currently full of real and self-proclaimed experts telling us that the war is going badly for Russia and that the Ukraine might end the conflict victoriously. We all hope that this is true. But hope is not a good adviser in defence and international politics. There are several problems with this hope, as it is often currently presented. Our information in the public domain is still sketchy, and yet it is the debate in these fora that shapes public opinion. A lot of the information being used as the foundation for analysis stems from unverified sources, including the Facebook page of the Ukrainian general staff. This is clearly different in the world of intelligence, but a lot of the current debates are not based on the classified material that is

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available to the men with the dark sunglasses. We do not really know how many tanks the Russians have lost or what their actual casualty figures are. The figures that I have seen in open sources oscillate between 10% and 40% of Russian manpower (the latter figure obviously being too high and probably the expression of some wishful thinking).

It is clear and obvious that the Russian invasion is not going to plan and that the Russians are encountering a much more determined enemy than they expected. They were over-optimistic and their intelligence was clearly wrong; their national bias shaped a picture that the Russians were the liberators of the oppressed brethren in ‘Nazi Ukraine’. Very quickly they had to realise that the Ukrainians did not want to be ‘liberated’. The over-optimistic Russian view led to poor preparations, and we see that the Army is being slowed down and has been stopped on several axis of advance. As we have learnt in the last few days, the attack on Kiev has failed utterly. The abhorrent reports of atrocities and war crimes in the Kiev region are, if verified, also an expression

of growing Russian frustration with an operation not going to plan. The strategic assessment was clearly wrong. The lessons from the wars in Chechnya, Georgia and the occupation of the Crimea suggested that the Kremlin did not have to fear a united reaction from the west. ‘Why die for Poland’ was written on placards that German soldiers held up and showed the French forces on the Western Front in 1939. In the eyes of the Russian leadership the question ‘why die for Ukraine’ seemed to be a viable one for the rest of the world, and they were probably surprised by the unified reactions of the international community.

In recent days, Churchill’s famous assessment of Russia has been used by all sorts of commentators to express the general confusion about the country’s recent actions: ‘Russia is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma’. This is, however, not the end of the quote, and the second part, which gets cited far less frequently, offers a way to understanding this riddle: ‘But perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest’. This points to an important factor, one that often seems to be overlooked in the current

debates. The Russians are clear strategic thinkers, who study their Clausewitz in depth.<sup>2</sup> We do not have to share the Russian views – and who would argue that invading the Ukraine was a sensible strategic decision – but we have to understand the Russian strategic culture. In order to achieve strategic national aims the use of force remains, as we can currently see, a legitimate means in the heads of the Russian strategists. Any threat to the national security, however defined, can and potentially will be answered by the use of force. This is in line with the historical understanding of war, which saw military force as an acceptable tool in international relations. *Ultima ratio regis*, the last argument of the king, was inscribed on many guns of the European armies of the *anciens régimes*. This understanding was rejected by the signatories of the Kellogg-Briand Pact in 1928 (including the Soviet Union, in whose tradition Putin seems to see modern-day Russia), but, as history has shown, the practical value of this pact has been questionable. In line with traditional Russian / Soviet thinking, the idea is to take the fight to the enemy rather than fight on one’s own soil. Such threats were identified by the

<sup>2</sup>For a discussion of this, see Andrew Monaghan; *Russian Views of ‘Winning’: ‘Velikaya Pobeda’ and ‘pobedonosnaya voyna’*, in Matthias Strohn, ed., *Winning Wars, the Enduring Nature and Changing Character of Victory From Antiquity to the 21st Century*, Oxford 2020, pp. 243-260.



leaders in the Kremlin in 1968 (Czechoslovakia), in Chechnya (first war 1994-96, second war 1999-2009) and Georgia (2008). The events in the Ukraine should therefore not have come as a surprise. The fact that they did shock the world was thus more the result of a misinterpretation of reality and a good dose of wishful thinking. The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union seemed to have brought about a deep change in the Russian psyche and strategy. And yet, the writings had been on the wall for a long time; we just need to remind ourselves that in 2005 Putin stated the collapse of the Soviet Union was the biggest geo-political catastrophe of the 20th century. With the benefit of hindsight, it now seems clear that this belief has always been dominant in the Kremlin and that our western biases deceived us.

The tactical and operational performances of the Russian Army in the Ukraine have been criticised by pretty much every commentator, and rightly so. But what is often overlooked is that this matters less from a Russian point of view. For them, strategic victory is all that counts, and they are willing to accept tactical and operational set-backs if the strategic outcome is right. Military actions are part of the broader political and economic activity. Our minds are currently focused on the military actions in the Ukraine, but seeing the bigger strategic picture remains essential. It should not even be necessary to state this, as this should be self-explanatory. But, at times, it seems that some people have forgotten about this simple fact. The west seems to have an unhealthy obsession with the tactical level. It seems that two reasons are at the core of this problem. First, the experiences from recent operations such as in Iraq and Afghanistan have concentrated on this level of war. It could be argued that the character of these deployments and the (historically speaking) small national contingents deployed to these theatres enforced this view. There

is, however, another reason for this unhealthy obsession with the tactical level of war. The drastic reduction of manpower in western armies since the end of the Cold War resulted in a current lack of materiel and, more importantly, a corporate knowledge with regards to the operational level of war. All this seems to have contributed to a general misperception about the 'Russian way of war'. Every knocked out Russian tank is hailed in the social media networks as a defeat for the Russian bear. It is not, although Russian casualties have clearly been mounting. Naturally, tactics, operations and strategy impact upon one another. If they did not, the German Wehrmacht, arguably the tactically most able army of the Second World War, would have won the war. It lost because Germany's strategy was fundamentally flawed. As long as Russia will not falter at the strategic level (by whatever means this might be achieved, including the sanctions of the international community), and the Russian Army does not collapse or suffers a catastrophic defeat at the operational level, tactical set-backs will not drive the Army out of the Ukraine. We should not fool ourselves, the re-grouping that we currently see as a consequence of a failed 'Blitzkrieg' are not the swan-song of the invasion, but an operational pause. It is merely the end of (the failed) phase one, although the hope still remains that the on-going peace talks will result in a positive outcome. Most likely, the next phase will be characterised by more methodical battles and the increased use of firepower. This will mean more casualties, including among the Ukrainian population. A look back at a relatively recent Russian military operation shows what this could mean. During the first Chechnya War, the first Russian attempt to

**Ravaged by Russia:**  
Scars of war in Grozny



seize the city of Grozny failed. The defenders, often veterans of the Soviet Red Army, defeated the badly trained Russian troops. The city was eventually seized by the Russians after two more months of heavy fighting. This second phase of the battle was characterised by the Russian use of artillery. Per day, so the estimates state, the Russians fired up to 4,000 shells into Grozny, resulting in the destruction of the city and up to 25,000 civilian casualties.

This leads to the next point. We need to understand better the character of a major conventional war. History tells us that in such a war casualties mount quickly, usually on both sides. For some time now, the west has, thankfully, not experienced such a war and this has blurred our vision of reality. When compared to other wars in history, the western losses sustained in countries like Afghanistan and Iraq were very light indeed – although this should not distract from the suffering at the personal level of those who were affected by these casualties. A major continental European war does not fit into the mould of these recent experiences, and it seems possible that not everybody in the west has yet made the intellectual transition from Kandahar to Kiev. To give just one example: statistically, the Soviet Union lost approximately 20,000 dead every day between 22 June 1941 and 8 May 1945. 2022 is not 1941, but the figure shows what casualties the Soviet Union (of which, naturally, the Ukraine was a part!) was willing to accept in order to achieve strategic victory. I have seen commentaries in the social media by military personnel stating that the assumed 10 or 20% loss of manpower renders the Russian Army unable

to conduct tactical engagements or launch operations. This might be so in some militaries, especially those that place a lot of emphasis on combat service support, such as logistics. The Russian Army is leaner (some would say less prepared) in these areas. As a consequence, we have seen the attacks stall, but this does not mean that the Russian Army is no longer able to carry out attacks. Looking back at the world wars, every commander would have been very happy to go onto the offensive with 'only' 80 or 90% of the established combat power available.

A lot has been written about the composition of the modern Russian forces in general and the contingents that are currently deployed in the Ukraine.<sup>3</sup> The Russian Army of today is clearly not the Red Army of the Second World War, but it might be worth keeping these historical lessons of major conflict in mind when analysing the Russian military activities in Ukraine. If history tells us one thing, then it is that underestimating Russia comes at great peril. Today, with the events in the Ukraine unfolding before our eyes, many see the Russian Army as a mere paper tiger. But, like in 1941, this tiger still has claws. A casual approach to our own strategic thinking and to our understanding of others' histories can lead to the dangerous circumstance where hope replaces prudence. Regardless of what I hope, I suspect that there is much to play out yet in Ukraine.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, the superb piece by Ben Hodges and Julian Lindley French, [lindleyfrench.blogspot.com/2022/03/where-is-russian-army.html](https://lindleyfrench.blogspot.com/2022/03/where-is-russian-army.html) [accessed 24/03/2022].