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Politics By Other Means

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Carl von Clausewitz

With the sole possible exception of the great Sun Tzu and his “*Art of War*”, no military theorist has had such an enduring philosophical impact as the Prussian General Carl Philipp Gottfried von Clausewitz. A participant in the Napoleonic Wars, Clausewitz in his later years dedicated himself to the work that would become his iconic achievement - a dense tome titled simply “*Vom Kriege*” - On War. The book is a meditation on both military strategy and the socio-political phenomenon of war, which is heavily laced with philosophical rumination. Though *On War* has had an enduring and indelible impact on the study of military arts, the book itself is at times a rather difficult thing to read - a fact that stems from the great tragedy that Clausewitz was never actually able to finish it. He died in 1831 at the age of only 51 with his manuscript in an unedited disorder; and it fell upon his wife to attempt to organize and publish his papers.

Clausewitz, more than anything, is famous for his aphorisms - “Everything is very simple in war, but the simplest thing is difficult” - and his vocabulary of war, which includes terms such as “friction” and “culmination.” Among all his eminently quotable passages, however, one is perhaps the most famous: his claim that “War is a mere continuation of politics by other means.”

It is on this claim that I wish to fixate for the moment, but first, it may be worthwhile to read the entirety of Clausewitz’s passage on the subject:

“War is the mere continuation of politics by other means. We see,

therefore, that War is not merely a political act, but also a real political instrument, a continuation of political commerce, a carrying out of the same by other means. All beyond this which is strictly peculiar to War relates merely to the peculiar nature of the means which it uses. That the tendencies and views of policy shall not be incompatible with these means, the Art of War in general and the Commander in each particular case may demand, and this claim is truly not a trifling one. But however powerfully this may react on political views in particular cases, still it must always be regarded as only a modification of them; for the political view is the object, War is the means, and the means must always include the object in our conception.”

On War, Volume 1, Chapter 1, Section 24

Once we cut through Clausewitz’s dense and verbose style, the claim here is relatively simple: war-making always exists in reference to some greater political goal, and it exists on the political spectrum. Politics lies at every point along the axis: war is begun in response to some political need, it is maintained and continued as an act of political will, and it ultimately hopes to achieve political aims. War cannot be separated from politics - indeed, it is the political aspect that makes it war. We may even go further and state that war in the absence of the political superstructure ceases to be war, and instead becomes raw, animalistic violence. It is the political dimension that makes war recognizably distinct from other forms of violence.

Let us contemplate Russia’s war-making in Ukraine in these terms.

It is often the case that the most consequential men in the world are poorly understood in their time - power enshrouds and distorts

the great man. This was certainly the case of Stalin and Mao, and it is equally true of both Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping. Putin in particular is viewed in the west as a Hitlerian demagogue who rules with extrajudicial terror and militarism. This could hardly be farther from the truth.

Almost every aspect of the western caricature of Putin is deeply misguided - though this [recent profile by Sean McMeekin](#) comes much closer than most. To begin with, Putin is not a demagogue - he is not a naturally charismatic man, and though he has over time greatly improved his skills as a retail politician, and he is capable of giving impactful speeches when needed, he is not someone who relishes the podium. Unlike Donald Trump, Barack Obama, or even - God forbid - Adolf Hitler, Putin is simply not a natural crowd pleaser. In Russia itself, his image is that of a fairly boring but level headed career political servant, rather than a charismatic populist. His enduring popularity in Russia is far more linked to his stabilization of the Russian economy and pension system than it is to pictures of him riding a horse shirtless.



Trust the plan, even when the plan is slow moving and boring

Furthermore, Putin - contrary to the view that he wields unlimited extralegal authority - is rather a stickler for proceduralism. Russia's government structure expressly empowers a very strong presidency (this was an absolute necessity in the wake of total state collapse in the early 1990's), but within these parameters Putin is not viewed as a particularly exciting personality prone to radical or explosive decision making. Western critics may claim that there is no rule **of** law in Russia, but at the very least, Putin governs **by** law, with bureaucratic mechanisms and procedures forming the superstructure within which he acts.

This was made vividly apparent in recent days. With Ukraine advancing on multiple fronts, a fresh cycle of doom and triumph was set in motion: pro-Ukrainian figures exult in the apparent collapse of the Russian army, while many in the Russian camp bemoan leadership which they conclude must be criminally incompetent. With all of this underway on the military side, Putin has calmly ushered the annexation process through its legal mechanisms - first holding referendums, then signing treaties on entry in the Russian Federation with the four former Ukrainian oblasts, which were then sent to the State Duma for ratification, followed by the Federation Council, followed again by signature and verification by Putin. As Ukraine throws its summer accumulations into the fight, Putin appears to be mired in paperwork and procedure. The treaties were even reviewed by the Russian constitutional court, and deadlines were set to end the Ukrainian hryvnia as legal tender and replace it with the ruble.

This is a strange spectacle. Putin is plodding his way through the

boring legalities of annexation, seemingly deaf to the chorus which is shouting at him that his war is on the verge of total failure. The implacable calm radiating - at least publicly - from the Kremlin seems at odds with events at the front.

So, what really is going on here? Is Putin truly so detached from events on the ground that he is unaware that his army is being defeated? Is he planning to use nuclear weapons in a fit of rage? Or could this be, as Clausewitz says, the mere continuation of politics by other means?

Of all the phantasmagorical claims that have been made about the Russo-Ukrainian War, few are as difficult to believe as the claim that Russia intended to conquer Ukraine with fewer than 200,000 men. Indeed, a central truth of the war that observers simply must come to grasps with is the fact that the Russian army has been badly outnumbered from day one, despite Russia having an enormous demographic advantage over Ukraine itself. On paper, Russia has committed an expeditionary force of less than 200,000 men, though of course that full amount has not been on the frontline in active combat lately.

The light force deployment is related to Russia's rather unique service model, which has combined "contract soldiers" - the professional core of the army - with a reservist pool that is generated with an annual conscription wave. Russia consequentially has a two-tiered military model, with a world class professional ready force and a large pool of reserve cadres that can be dipped into, augmented with auxiliary forces like BARS (volunteers), Chechens, and LNR-DNR militia.





The nation's sons - bearers of vitality and sinew of the state

This two-tiered, mixed service model reflects, in some ways, the geostrategic schizophrenia that plagued post-Soviet Russia.

Russia is an enormous country with potentially colossal, continent spanning security commitments, which inherited a Soviet legacy of mass. No country has ever demonstrated a capacity for wartime mobilization on a scale to match the USSR. The transition from a Soviet mobilization scheme to a smaller, leaner, professional ready force was part and parcel of Russia's neoliberal austerity regime throughout much of the Putin years.

It is important to understand that military mobilization, as such, is also a form of *political mobilization*. The ready contract force required a fairly low level of political consensus and buy-in from the bulk of the Russian population. This Russian contract force can still accomplish a great deal, militarily speaking - it can destroy Ukrainian military installations, wreak havoc with artillery, bash its way into urban agglomerations in the Donbas, and destroy much of Ukraine's indigenous war-making potential. It cannot, however, wage a multi-year continental war against an enemy which

outnumbers it by at least four to one, and which is sustained with intelligence, command and control, and material which are beyond its immediate reach - especially if the rules of engagement prevent it from striking the enemy's vital arteries.

More force deployment is needed. Russia must transcend the neoliberal austerity army. It has the material capacity to mobilize the needed forces - it has many millions in its reservist pool, enormous inventories of equipment, and indigenous production capacity undergirded by the natural resources and production potential of the Eurasian bloc that has closed ranks around it. But remember - military mobilization is also political mobilization.

The Soviet Union was able to mobilize tens of millions of young men to blunt, swamp, and eventually annihilate the German land army because it wielded two powerful political instruments. The first was the awesome and far reaching power of the Communist Party, with its ubiquitous organs. The second was the truth - German invaders had come with genocidal intent (Hitler at one point mused that Siberia could be turned into a Slav reservation for the survivors, which could be bombed periodically to remind them who was in charge).

Putin lacks a coercive organ as powerful as the Communist Party, which had both astonishing material power and a compelling ideology which promised to bring about an accelerated path to non-capitalist modernity. Indeed, no country today has a political apparatus like that splendid communist machine, save perhaps China and North Korea. So, in the absence of a direct lever to create political - and hence military - mobilization, Russia must find an alternative route to creating a political consensus to wage a higher form of war.

This has now been accomplished, courtesy of western Russophobia and Ukraine's penchant for violence. A subtle, but profound transformation of the Russian socio-political body is underway.

Putin and those around him conceived of the Russo-Ukrainian War in existential terms from the very beginning. It is unlikely, however, that most Russians understood this. Instead, they likely viewed the war the same way Americans viewed the war in Iraq and Ukraine - as a justified military enterprise that was nevertheless merely a technocratic task for the professional military; hardly a matter of life and death for the nation. I highly doubt that any American ever believed that the fate of the nation hinged on the war in Afghanistan (Americans have not fought an existential war since 1865), and judging by the recruitment crisis plaguing the American military, it does not seem like anyone perceives a genuine foreign existential threat.

What has happened in the months since February 24 is rather remarkable. The existential war for the Russian nation has been incarnated and made real for Russian citizens. Sanctions and anti-Russian propaganda - demonizing the entire nation as "orcs" - has rallied even initially skeptical Russians behind the war, and Putin's approval rating has soared. [A core western assumption, that Russians would turn on the government, has reversed](#). Videos showing the torture of Russian POWs by frothing Ukrainians, of Ukrainian soldiers calling Russian mothers to mockingly tell them their sons are dead, of Russian children killed by shelling in Donetsk, have served to validate Putin's implicit claim that Ukraine is a demon possessed state that must be exorcised with high explosives. Amidst all of this - helpfully, from the perspective of

Alexander Dugin and his neophytes - American pseudo-intellectual "[Blue Checks](#)" have publicly drooled over the prospect of "[decolonizing and demilitarizing](#)" Russia, which plainly entails the dismemberment of the Russian state and the partitioning of its territory. The government of Ukraine ([in now deleted tweets](#)) publicly claimed that Russians are prone to barbarism because they are a mongrel race with Asiatic blood mixing.

Simultaneously, Putin has moved towards - and ultimately achieved - his project of formal annexation of Ukraine's old eastern rim. This has also *legally* transformed the war into an existential struggle. Further Ukrainian advances in the east are now, in the eyes of the Russian state, an assault on sovereign Russian territory and an attempt to destroy the integrity of the Russian state. Recent polling shows that a supermajority of Russians support defending these new territories at any cost.

All domains now align. Putin and company conceived of this war from the beginning as an existential struggle for Russia, to eject an anti-Russian puppet state from its doorstep and defeat a hostile incursion into Russian civilizational space. Public opinion is now increasingly in agreement with this (surveys show that Russian distrust of NATO and "western values" have skyrocketed), and the legal framework post-annexation recognizes this as well. The ideological, political, and legal domains are now united in the view that Russia is fighting for its very existence in Ukraine. The unification of the technical, ideological, political, and legal dimensions was, just moments ago, described by the head of Russia's communist party, Gennady Zyuganov:

“So, the President signed decrees on the admission of the DPR, LPR, Zaporozhye and Kherson LPR regions into Russia. Bridges are

burned . What was clear from the moral and statist points of view has now become a legal fact: on our land there is an enemy, he kills and maims the citizens of Russia. The country demands the most decisive action to protect compatriots. Time does not wait.”

A political consensus for higher mobilization and greater intensity has been achieved. Now all that remains is the implementation of this consensus in the material world of fist and boot, bullet and shell, blood and iron.

One of the peculiarities of European history is the truly shocking extent to which the Romans were far ahead of their time in the sphere of military mobilization. Rome conquered the world largely because it had a truly exceptional mobilization capacity, for centuries consistently generating high levels of mass military participation from the male population of Italy. Caesar brought more than 60,000 men to the Battle of Alesia when he conquered Gaul - a force generation that would not be matched for centuries in the post-Roman world.

After the fall of the Western Roman Empire, state capacity in Europe deteriorated rapidly. Royal authority in both France and Germany was curtailed as the aristocracy and urban authorities grew in power. Despite the stereotype of despotic monarchy, political power in the middle ages was highly fragmented, and taxation and mobilization were highly localized. The Roman capacity to mobilize large armies that were centrally controlled and financed was lost, and warfare became the domain of a narrow fighting class - the petty gentry, or knights.

Consequentially, medieval European armies were shockingly small. At pivotal English-French battles like Agincourt and Crecy,

English armies numbered less than 10,000, and the French no more than 30,000. The world historical Battle of Hastings - which sealed the Norman conquest of Britain - pitted two armies of fewer than 10,000 men against each other. The Battle of Grunwald - in which a Polish-Lithuanian coalition defeated the Teutonic Knights - was one of the largest battles in Medieval Europe and still featured two armies that numbered at most 30,000.

European mobilization powers and state capacity were shockingly low in this era compared to other states around the world. Chinese armies routinely numbered in the low hundreds of thousands, and the Mongols, even with significantly lower bureaucratic sophistication, could field 80,000 men.

The situation began to shift radically as intensified military competition - in particular the savage 30 years' war - forced European states to at last begin a shift back towards centralized state capacity. The model of military mobilization shifted at last from the servitor system - where a small, self-funded military class provided military service - to the fiscal military state, where armies were raised, funded, directed, and sustained through the fiscal-bureaucratic systems of centralized governments.

Through the early modern period, military service models acquired a unique admixture of conscription, professional service, and the servitor system. The aristocracy continued to provide military service in the emerging officer corps, while conscription and impressment were used to fill out the ranks. Notably, however, conscripts were inducted into very long terms of service. This reflected the political needs of monarchy in the age of absolutism. The army was not a forum for popular political participation in the regime - it was an instrument for the regime to defend itself from

both foreign enemies and peasant jacqueries. Therefore, conscripts were not rotated back into society. It was necessary to turn the army into a distinct social class with some element of remoteness from the population at large - this was a professional military institution that served as an internal bulwark of the regime.

The rise of nationalistic regimes and mass politics allowed the scale of armies to increase much further. Governments in the late 19th century now had less to fear from their own populations than did the absolute monarchies of the past - this changed the nature of military service and at last returned Europe to the system that the Romans had in millennia past. Military service was now a form of mass political participation - this allowed for conscripts to be called up, trained, and rotated back into society - the reserve cadre system that characterized armies in both of the world wars.

In sum, the cycle of military mobilization systems in Europe is a mirror of the political system. Armies were very small during the era where there was little to no mass political participation with the regime. Rome fielded large armies because there was significant political buy-in and a cohesive identity in the form of Roman citizenship. This allowed Rome to generate high military participation, even in the Republican era where the Roman state was very small and bureaucratically sparse. Medieval Europe had fragmented political authority and an extremely low sense of cohesive political identity, and consequently its armies were shockingly small. Armies began to grow in size again as the sense of national identity and participation grew, and it is no coincidence that the largest war in history - the Nazi-Soviet War - was fought between two regimes that had totalizing ideologies that generated an extremely high level of political participation.

That brings us to today. In the 21st century, with its interconnectedness and crushing availability of both information and misinformation, the process of generating mass political - and hence military - participation is much more nuanced. No country wields a totalizing utopian vision, and it is inarguable that the sense of national cohesion is significantly lower now than it was one hundred years ago.

Putin, very simply, could not have conducted a large scale mobilization at the onset of the war. He possessed neither a coercive mechanism nor the manifest threat to generate mass political support. Few Russians would have believed that there was some existential threat lurking in the shadow - they needed to be shown, and the west has not disappointed. Likewise, few Russians would likely have supported the obliteration of Ukrainian infrastructure and urban utilities in the opening days of the war. But now, the only vocal criticism of Putin within Russia is on the side of further escalation. The problem with Putin, from the Russian perspective, is that he has not gone far enough. In other words - mass politics have already moved ahead of the government, making mobilization and escalation politically trivial. Above all, we must remember that Clausewitz's maxim remains true. The military situation is merely a subset of the political situation, and military mobilization is also political mobilization - a manifestation of society's political participation in the state.

Ukraine's offensive phase continues on multiple fronts. They are pushing into northern Lugansk, and after weeks of banging their heads against a wall in Kherson, they have finally made territorial progress. Yet, just today, Putin said that it is necessary to conduct medical examinations of the children in the newly admitted oblasts

and rebuild school playgrounds. What is going on? Is he totally detached from events at the front?

There are really only two ways to interpret what is happening. One is the western spin: the Russian army is defeated and depleted and is being driven from the field. Putin is deranged, his commanders are incompetent, and Russia's only card left to play is to throw drunk, untrained conscripts into the meat grinder.

The other is the interpretation that I have advocated, that Russia is massing for a winter escalation and offensive, and is currently engaged in a calculated trade wherein they give up space in exchange for time and Ukrainian casualties. Russia continues to retreat where positions are either operationally compromised or faced with overwhelming Ukrainian numbers, but they are very careful to extract forces out of operational danger. In Lyman, where Ukraine threatened to encircle the garrison, Russia committed mobile reserves to unblock the village and secure the withdrawal of the garrison. Ukraine's "encirclement" evaporated, and the Ukrainian interior ministry was bizarrely compelled to [tweet \(and then delete\)](#) video of destroyed civilian vehicles as "proof" that the Russian forces had been annihilated.

Russia will likely continue to pull back over the coming weeks, withdrawing units intact under their artillery and air umbrella, grinding down Ukrainian heavy equipment stocks and wearing away their manpower. Meanwhile, new equipment continues to congregate in Belgorod, Zaporizhia, and Crimea. My expectation remains the same: episodic Russian withdrawal until the front stabilizes roughly at the end of October, followed by an operational pause until the ground freezes, followed by escalation and a winter offensive by Russia once they have finished amassing sufficient

units.

There is an eerie calm radiating from the Kremlin. Mobilization is underway - 200,000 men are currently undergoing refresher training at ranges around Russia. Trainloads of military equipment continue to flood across the Kerch bridge, but Ukraine's offensive plods on with no Russian reinforcements to be seen at the front. The disconnect between the Kremlin's stoicism and the deterioration of the front are striking. Perhaps Putin and the entire Russian general staff really are criminally incompetent - perhaps the Russian reserves really are nothing but a bunch of drunks. Perhaps there is no plan.

Or perhaps, Russia's sons will answer the call of the motherland again, as they did in 1709, in 1812, and in 1941.

As the wolves once more prowl at the door, the old bear rises again to fight.

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