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## SRAD Director's Corner: Russia's Strategy and Its War on Ukraine

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## Russia's Strategy and Its War on Ukraine

George Shatzer

Review of

### The Russian Understanding of War: Blurring the Lines between War and Peace

By Oscar Jonsson

and

### Learning from Russia's Recent Wars: Why, Where, and When Russia Might Strike Next

By Neal G. Jesse

**Keywords:** Russia, Ukraine, Russian military theory, integrated warfare, NATO

Watching Russia's buildup of combat power around Ukraine in January and February this year, I, like many others, presumed that if Russian forces ever invaded, they would swiftly defeat the Ukrainian military and readily achieve their objectives. The so-called "correlation of forces" so greatly favored the Russian military that the outcome of a potential war in their favor seemed certain. Nearly.

Three months into Russia's brutal war against Ukraine, all such easy judgments are so far proving wrong. With limited but vital military backing from the United States and NATO, the Ukrainian armed forces have managed to push the Russian military to its apparent limit. Russia has suffered heavy personnel losses—perhaps as much as 10 percent of Russia's invasion forces have been killed or wounded if Ukrainian Defense Ministry estimates can be believed. Equipment and vehicle losses have been substantial, too. More importantly, Russian advances seem to have been halted, and Ukrainian forces appear to have reclaimed some previously lost ground. As a bonus, Russia also seems to be losing the information war as most international opinion is critical of Russia's aggression.

These unexpected developments have led to many questions. How did Russia so badly misjudge Ukrainian military strength? Why does the Russian military seem to be struggling with even the fundamental aspects of combat operations? Why did Russia invade Ukraine? What is Russian President Vladimir Putin

thinking? While much media speculation has focused on these questions, even informed voices, such as those of former US and NATO senior commanders, have yet to provide satisfactory answers. As strategists and military professionals, we must find these answers. Such insight will provide Ukraine and NATO an edge in the current war; it may also provide critical advantages in future conflicts with Russia. Barring a radical change in Russia's national leadership, the West should reasonably expect the primary challenge to European security to continue to come from Russia.

Knowing one's enemy is such a basic concept in strategy it becomes easy to forget. Dealing with one's issues and the myriad preparations for war can be all-consuming, leaving little time to look outward beyond them. Because understanding the enemy is exceptionally difficult, intelligence preparation of the environment fixates on more readily measured material and technical factors such as combat power. Even strategic assessments are woefully lacking in their examination of enemy strategy, thinking, and motivation. These assessments rely on simplistic rubrics such as DIME or ends, ways, and means. They often forget careful consideration of history, psychology, or the moral and spiritual factors driving the human choice to wage war. This oversight is not surprising given how fraught these areas are with subjectivity and the risk of misinterpretation.

Even "understanding the enemy" as a concept itself is misunderstood. It is a mistake to think the aim is to predict how an enemy will behave in a given situation. Not even the enemy can predict this about themselves. Instead, it is about knowing their habits and weaknesses to understand better how they are vulnerable. It is about appreciating their motivations, so the limits of their will are made clearer. These things suggest points for an attack that will be more effective in damaging the enemy and changing their behavior. Understanding the enemy is also a pathway to understanding oneself because it frees us from our limited perspectives. All this is the starting point for understanding the kind of war on which we are embarking.

How Russia understands war is the focus of Oscar Jonsson's *The Russian Understanding of War: Blurring the Lines between War and Peace*. This short yet detailed book provides a comprehensive examination of the modern evolution of Russian military theory and strategy. Jonsson, a Swedish security policy researcher, delivers a startling assessment that Russian political and security leaders have developed a fundamentally different appreciation of war than that of the West. In essence, Jonsson claims Russia believes the actual nature of war, not just its character, has changed. He provides a convincing analysis of Russian military writings from pre-Soviet years through today that shows Russian leaders and strategists have rejected the classical view that war is defined by armed

violence. He reinforces this conclusion quite convincingly with evidence from Russian government strategic documents and statements from leaders such as Putin and General Valery Gerasimov, the current and long-serving chief of the Russian General Staff.

Jonsson corrects the common misperception in the West that Gerasimov's popular works, especially certain speeches from 2013 and 2014, constitute a doctrine or that they describe how Russia should conduct its wars. Instead, Jonsson asserts Gerasimov is describing from the Russian point of view how the United States and the West subvert legitimate rule in countries to generate uprisings and eventually impose liberal democratic systems. Jonsson clarifies that this notion well predates Gerasimov's statements by citing several others who previously have written about this topic (especially General Makhmut Gareyev, former president of the Russian Academy of Military Sciences). This body of Russian military thought concludes the West has mastered information and psychological warfare to such an extent that these operations are now as effective as armed violence in overthrowing governments. Hence, the very nature of war has changed from one defined by armed violence extending from policy to one of a policy of subversion, essentially constituting violence against the government and people of a target nation. As Jonsson puts it succinctly, this new Russian understanding of war is "a shift with a larger focus to the political goal of war rather than its means (the armed violence)" (154).

Jonsson then illustrates how Russia has also shifted its views on the new means of this redefined war. He contends Russia has assessed the "color revolution," as a supposedly popular democratic uprising, as the preferred method of the West to topple legitimate governments it opposes. Jonsson dedicates an entire chapter to the Russian analysis of color revolutions and the methods the West allegedly uses to foster them. At its core, a color revolution is a product of information warfare—liberal democratic ideas trampling traditional societal values and cultures to create "controlled chaos" in the target state. These effects are supported by various financial, social, training, and media measures to drive the color revolution forward. The supporters of the revolution are convinced (mainly due to influence from nongovernmental organizations and the media) that their actions are spontaneous and natural. Supporters also engage in their brand of fascism and become irregular forces imposing conformity and attacking anyone with traditional views. In effect, Russia believes the West employs "reflexive control" against these countries.

This summary of Jonsson's assessment of Russian views of US and Western strategies might sound strange to anyone used to hearing Russia uses these same methods in its operations against others, especially in Georgia and Ukraine in recent years. Jonsson makes an important point that could use further

attention—that Russia is describing itself but projecting onto others to legitimize its view. Jonsson notes the Soviet government commonly employed this practice (75). Still, the book is eye-opening and provides relevant insights into the war in Ukraine this review will return to later.

Where Jonsson tends to focus on the why behind Russian strategy, Neal Jesse centers more on the how of Russian strategy in *Learning from Russia's Recent Wars: Why, Where, and When Russia Might Strike Next*. Jesse's book is similarly concise but still impressively detailed even in the breadth of topics it covers. He opens with a brief comparison of political science theories to explain Russian foreign policy. His conclusions are barebones: Russia seeks to rebuild its military while creating a buffer zone of friendly countries to increase its influence as it strives to return to great-power status.

More expansive are Jesse's recounting and analysis of Russian aggression in the post-Soviet era from Chechnya to Georgia to Ukraine (the 2014 intervention). Assessments of Russian key capabilities, especially cyber and nonconventional means, thoroughly describe how Russia has subverted and aggressively coerced its smaller Eastern European and Baltic neighbors. Not surprisingly, these methods mirror Russia's view of Western-generated color revolutions. A key difference is that Russia has used its forces in conventional and unconventional ways to support the supposedly popular resistance movements in the target nations.

Jesse also includes an entire chapter on Russian efforts to rebuild its military. Like many others, he points to the war in Georgia as a major impetus to reform and notes many reforms were well underway prior to 2008. He asserts that Russian leadership was already wary of NATO's intentions even by the mid-1990s and realized the shortcomings of its military because of its performance in the Chechen wars. So, while its military shortcomings were evident in Georgia (and again in Ukraine in 2014), Russia has actually been attempting to improve its armed forces for nearly the past 25 years. Jesse concludes Russia still has a long way to go with these reforms, which have been hampered by Western economic sanctions since the 2014 intervention in Ukraine and the deeply ingrained corruption of the Russian defense industry.

Impressively, Jesse arrives at conclusions about the situation in Ukraine in 2020 (when the book was published) that are very relevant to the Russian decision to go to war there today. He assesses that despite some success from Russian efforts to destabilize the Ukrainian government, Ukraine responded reasonably well and stabilized the security situation even in its Eastern oblasts. As a result, the state of the pro-Russian position in Ukraine has not improved substantially since the 2014 intervention. Further, Jesse asserts that Russia would be motivated to act more overtly if an opportunity (such as with Crimea) or a

need arose (for example, continued Ukrainian tilting toward the EU and NATO). He correctly judges the “Russian threat to Ukraine is the most obvious and the most constant” of all the potential threats to other nations (158).

Both authors’ combined analyses and conclusions provide a beneficial understanding of Russian views on war, in general, and the motivations for its war on Ukraine, in particular. Jonsson and Jesse describe Russian thinking as more holistic than American or Western thinking. While the United States tends to view individual components separately and then aggregate them into a larger system, Russia considers all constituent elements inherently connected in a synthesized whole. This belief predisposes Russia to perceive the United States and the West have developed a new, integrated form of warfare that combines information and armed means and fundamentally changes the nature of war.

Reinforcing this view is the Russian assessment that the West uses this form of warfare in a campaign ultimately aimed at ending the Russian nation as it exists today. Both authors note Russia accuses NATO of renegeing on alleged promises not to expand its membership following the collapse of the Soviet Union, especially to include former Soviet republics. It also perceives the United States readily violates international law and nations’ sovereignty when it suits its security interests. Russia further believes the color revolutions in Europe (and the Arab Spring) were crises manufactured by the West intended to oust legitimate governments and propagate liberal democratic beliefs antithetical to traditional spiritual and moral values held in those countries.

As Jonsson and Jesse point out, this belief makes sense because Russian leaders perceive that “soft power” and influence are tools of the state and thus cannot be spontaneous or naturally occurring. Russia views the color revolutions as fascist movements that purposefully aim to oppress the rights of ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking peoples—and fracture the *Russkiy Mir* (the Russian World or core Russian culture). Russia even perceives the United States has interfered in its elections. It certainly recalls the US, UK, and French intervention in its civil war in support of the White, anti-Bolshevik army. In essence, Russia believes the United States and the West are at war with it today, even if that war is undeclared and involves primarily unarmed offensives.

This worldview makes most any action permissible because that action would necessarily be defensive. And this is how Russia frames its actions today in Ukraine—a special military operation first intended to defend the Russian people in Ukraine from a repressive, illegitimate government and, ultimately, as a step to protect Russia from the West’s campaign against it. Further, Russia has traditionally viewed Ukraine as central to its history and at the heart of the concept of *Novorossiya* (or New Russia), a claimed crown jewel of the Russian nation.

More practically, many factors make Ukraine especially important to Russia. Ukraine is the second-largest country in Europe (its sheer size puts the Russian military's struggles there in perspective—Ukraine is nearly as large as Texas in land area). Ukraine sits on the Black Sea and borders four NATO member states. About three-quarters of Russian gas exports to Europe flow through Ukraine. Ukraine is a major player in the global agro-economy, producing about 12 percent of the world's wheat and about 17 percent of its corn. Lastly, Russian shipyards cannot manufacture aircraft carriers. All of Russia's carriers were built in Ukraine, including the only one in service today (the *Admiral Kuznetsov*).

Jonsson and Jesse's enlightening books make Putin's decision to invade Ukraine appear logical given all these considerations. Controlling Ukraine is essential to defending the Russian people and the Russian state from the West's war. Russian efforts to control Ukraine have effectively stalled since the 2014 intervention, and Russian measures to destabilize Ukraine have not prevented it from tilting closer to both NATO and the EU. Resistance groups there never coalesced into a viable threat to the Ukrainian government. Russian pledges of support to these groups likely also created pressure on Russia to uphold their promises. Otherwise, Russia risked creating the perception it was not truly serious about the claimed fascist threat to the Russian people. While seizing Crimea was an important achievement, the region remained cut off practically from Russia. Finally, Russia's access to the Black Sea was still greatly restricted.

In sum, Russia had few good options to improve its position in Ukraine. Continuing to do more of what it had been doing since 2014 must have seemed like a dead end, and disengaging was completely incompatible with its worldview and rhetoric.

Additionally, the risk of a US or NATO military intervention in response to a Russian invasion must have seemed remote, given the West's previously muted response to Russian operations in Georgia, Syria, Crimea, and Ukraine. Finally, Russia likely judged the resistance potential of the Ukrainian military to be low, given its uneven performance against an unorganized band of resistance fighters who did not have the combat power of the Russian military. And, at any rate, with no decisive intervention from the United States and NATO expected, even a highly capable Ukrainian defense would eventually be overwhelmed.

Both books are solid works that lift the fog shrouding Russian views on war and its strategy in Ukraine. While neither book can predict Russian actions, each volume will help readers better understand Russian motivations and the scope of its will to wage war—a valuable insight as strategists work out how to deal with Russian aggression.

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