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Russian ?New Generation? Warfare: Theory, Practice, and Lessons for U.S. Strategists

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Russian "New Generation" Warfare: Theory, Practice, and Lessons for U.S. Strategists

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Russian unconventional warfare—dubbed by analysts as "new generation" warfare—elevates the psychological and popular aspects of conflict more so than any of its geopolitical partners and rivals.**[i]** In an era of expanding popular engagement and attention to foreign conflicts, a strategic appreciation of these people-centric dimensions is more important now than ever. Recent interventions in Crimea and Donbas demonstrate the effectiveness of this new generation strategy, expose some critical weaknesses in U.S. approaches to unconventional war, and provide lessons for future strategic design.

Historical Roots of Popular Engagement

Theorists have long understood that the population is a critical center of gravity in warfare. More specifically, both Carl von Clausewitz and Sun Tzu linked popular support to the moral element of warfare: that is, a campaign's morality or legitimacy is determined by the interests and will of the people supplying it, fighting in it, voting on it, and suffering from it. Therefore, leaders should target both their own people and their enemy's: they should seek to treat their own with "benevolence, justice, and righteousness, [reposing] confidence in them,"**[ii]** while simultaneously attacking the enemy's population to bring about a "gradual exhaustion of his physical and moral resistance."**[iii]** The population is the third element of Clausewitz's trinity, and in unconventional war it is arguably the most important. Exhausting popular will can damage an enemy more than seizing territory or inflicting physical damage—indeed, it is the intended end result of that seizure or damage.

Guerilla warfare theorists and practitioners—those who are aided by states engaged in unconventional warfare—likewise recognize that the population is a critical center of gravity. Regardless of the process or method of resistance—be it Mao's three stages, Che's *foco*, or others—guerilla leaders agree that insurgencies suffocate absent popular support. In their guerilla warfare manuals, Mao and Che echo this lesson. Even before violence escalates, Mao's primary objective is to "persuade as many people as possible to commit themselves to the movement, so that it gradually acquires the quality of 'mass.'"**[iv]** And with perfect certainty, Che believes that the "absolute cooperation of the people" is vital for an insurgency's long-term success; to this end, "intensive popular work must be undertaken to explain the motives of the revolution, its ends, and to spread the incontrovertible truth that victory of the enemy against the people is finally impossible."**[v]** Thus, the population is a center of gravity across all kinds of warfare: insurgency and counterinsurgency, conventional and unconventional, past and present.

Due to recent and dramatic changes in media, technology, and culture, the population plays an even more vital role in twenty-first century unconventional conflict. It is an era of round-the-clock news coverage, where the population, aided by smartphones, cable television, and social media, can track its government and military with startling frequency. People are more connected, but they can also be more mercurial. Individuals are inundated by distraction upon distraction: from the latest rumor about a stewing political controversy to an upcoming thunderstorm that may cancel the Nationals' game, viewers' attention spans are short. Even more concerning, the population is susceptible to misinformation. In the never-ending search for TV ratings, primetime networks push "breaking stories" without properly validating their accuracy, featuring "expert" analysts on screen whose remarks can be swayed by emotion or impulse that are passed on to viewers at home.

These factors pose a particular challenge for military and political leadership engaging in unconventional warfare. Successful unconventional warfare mandates a long-term approach, beginning at Phase Zero long before violence breaks out. Phase Zero engagements are effective because they seek to use nonmilitary instruments to shape the operational environment, preventing violence from occurring in the first place. Yet, they produce few rewards that are obvious to a skeptical public; soft instruments of power such as diplomacy, economic aid, and propaganda require patient persistence, and do not produce tangible, immediate indicators of victory. Indeed, the public may find such soft engagements unnecessary or wasteful.

Facing an impatient and skeptical public, strategists must sustain popular support by encouraging patience as they employ a diverse array of nonmilitary instruments to preempt violence. In other words, the population must "buy-in" to unconventional warfare. In addition, strategists should deceive and manipulate international opponents who may criticize such interventions and attempt to counter their narrative. How well does Russia's new generation strategy achieve these goals? Does Russia inspire support from its own population, while denying its enemy's ability to do the same? These questions will help evaluate the effectiveness of Russian strategy.

Russian Theory

In both theory and practice, Russia's new generation warfare appreciates the popular element of war. In his report for the National Defense Academy of Latvia, Janis Berzins aptly describes Russian strategy as psychological or informational warfare.**[vi]** Whereas previous strategies focused on logistical or material concerns, such as the strength of the enemy's forces, Russia is now preoccupied with the battlespace of the mind:

> Thus, the Russian view of modern warfare is based on the idea that *the main battlespace is the mind* and, as a result, new-generation wars are to be dominated by information and psychological warfare, in order to achieve superiority in troops and weapons control, morally and psychologically depressing the enemy's armed forces personnel and civil population.**[vii]**

Berzins then lays out ten guidelines for "developing Russian military capabilities by 2020" that address this new battlespace: influence is prioritized over destruction; inner decay over annihilation; and culture over weapons or technology. It is a true total war battlespace that encompasses political, economic, informational, technological, and ecological instruments. This theory is then implemented through eight specific phases, starting with establishing a "favorable political, economic, and military setup" long before conflict begins. This essential first phase is ongoing. Indeed, there is no artificial binary between war and peace, but simply war at all times, in all places, and with all resources.

Furthermore, since Russia prefers nonmilitary, nonviolent measures, this new generation war rarely boils over into full-scale armed conflict. In addition, Russian strategy emphasizes the importance of deception and misinformation to conceal its aggressive operations, a policy known as *maskirovka* ("camouflage" in Russian). In *Taktika*, Russian strategist V.G. Reznichenko defines *maskirovka* as "a set of measures designed to mislead the enemy with respect to the presence and disposition of troops, various military installations, their status, combat readiness, and operations, as well as the plans of the command elements." **[viii]** Russian unconventional warfare is saturated in such deception, which makes war look like peace.

Russian Practice

Russia has masterfully implemented this new generation strategy in Crimea and Donbas. Consider the invasion of Crimea, which Russia silently executed under the guise of humanitarian intervention. With little local resistance or bloodshed, Russia carefully pried the peninsula back into its sphere of influence:

> Its success can be measured by the fact that in just three weeks, and without a shot being fired, the morale of the Ukrainian military was broken and all of their 190 bases had surrendered. Instead of relying on a mass deployment of tanks and artillery, the Crimean campaign deployed less than 10,000 assault troops—mostly naval infantry, already stationed in Crimea, backed by a few battalions of airborne troops and Spetsnaz commandos—against 16,000 Ukrainian military personnel. In addition, the heaviest vehicle used was the wheeled BTR-80 armored personal carrier.**[ix]**

Closely following its unconventional warfare theory, Russian waged total war, utilizing a variety of soft instruments to shape the operational environment long before 2014 and cultivating the popular support necessary to sustain such an intervention. First, it worked by, with, and through local forces: it paid off oligarchs to run their own local militias, bribed local officials with positions in the new shadow government, and aided separatist forces with intelligence, artillery, rations, and other essential logistical support. Russia also maintains close economic ties with Ukrainian businesses in the region, investing heavily in the industrial and energy sectors. Finally, it disseminates pro-Russian propaganda through Russian-owned and funded radio and television networks, which continue to berate Kiev as a Western puppet and emphasizing Russia and Ukraine's shared historic and cultural heritage. Through these mechanisms, Russia plants meaningful incentives for popular support and cooperation, while consistently denying the presence of Russian troops in Crimea or Donbas—true *maskirovka* in action. While controversial in the eyes of the international community, local polling suggests that a substantial majority of the local population endorsed the Russian invasion, a sentiment supported by the lack of ensuing popular resistance or violence and the transitions to regional shadow governments today.**[x]** Meanwhile, the Ukrainian Army continues to struggle with draft dodging and desertion, as the public appetite for war rapidly fades.**[xi]**

Strategic Communication: Inspiring Supporters, Fooling Critics

Russia's clever use of media and communication is a critical part of new generation warfare. Ultimately, *what* Russia does may not be as important as *how* it communicates and defends its legitimacy—both to the international community and to its own domestic population. The Ukrainian intervention is especially illustrative: first, Russia deceives the international community, evades traditional deterrent mechanisms, and establishes its own definition of legitimacy; and second, Russia inspires and sustains domestic popular support.

First, Russia establishes its legitimacy through its heavily publicized cooperation with the Federal Assembly, its national parliament. In a method known as “legalism,” the Kremlin persuades the assembly to issue official, legal authorizations for the use of force in Ukraine. Since 2014, it has claimed two legal justifications for force: one, the protection and self-defense of Russian nationals living in Donbas and Crimea; and two, the direct invitation for intervention by Donbas and Crimean leadership, as well as that of ousted president Viktor Yanukovych, whom Russia still believed was the legitimate leader of Ukraine in 2014.**[xii]**

According to U.S. and European critics, these justifications are illegitimate: they serve Russia’s own interests while trampling on Ukraine’s territorial sovereignty. Yet, by claiming to act in support of self-defense and sovereignty—claims supported by its own parliament’s legislation—Russia turns traditional deterrent mechanisms on their head. Indeed, self-defense is explicitly permitted in Article 51 of the UN Charter. And while Article 5 of the NATO Treaty states that “an armed attack against one” is considered an attack against the alliance, how should the alliance respond when the armed attack in question is morphed or denied by the aggressor? Russia’s new generation warfare deliberately blurs the line between military and nonmilitary action, making it more difficult to determine or agree that an armed attack has actually occured, especially when the aggressor claims to act in defense of one of the main principles of the UN Charter. Ultimately, both Russia and its opponents lean on the same words to legitimize their policies: words like “self-determination,” “self-defense,” and “sovereignty.” Yet Russia is the only party that effectively backs up its rhetoric with action—both in the Phase Zero stage and in later ones when military force is required.

Just as it confuses and manipulates international audiences, Russian does the same to its domestic population, pushing a consistent, optimistic narrative to sustain support for a prolonged intervention. There are many newspapers, magazines, and radio stations, but television is Russian’s primary source for news and information about the ongoing conflict, and it exercises dominant influence over public opinion. **[xiii]** Television producer Peter Pomerantsev, in his aptly titled *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible* , describes its influence thus:

> In a country covering nine time zones, one-sixth of the world’s land mass, stretching from the Pacific to the Baltic, from the Arctic to the Central Asian deserts, from near-medieval villages where people still draw water from wooden wells by hand, through single-factory towns and back to the blue glass and steel skyscrapers of the new Moscow—TV is the only force that can unify and rule and bind this country.**[xiv]**

The Russian government directly owns Channel One and Russia One, two of the three largest stations. Meanwhile, state-funded oligarchs own NTV, the third-largest channel, as well as leading newspaper and radio outlets.**[xv]** The government also aggressively censors speech that it considers offensive or critical. **[xvi]** It even hires social media “trolls” to obsessively peruse popular sites like Twitter and VKontakte who harass investigative journalists, Ukraine sympathizers, and even political opponents like German Chancellor Angela Merkel.**[xvii]** Working in “troll factories,” these users work in teams to provide a semblance of organic debate, fooling passive users.

Government influence over the media provides it with a direct channel to popular opinion, allowing the Kremlin to highlight the successes of new generation warfare and its easy payoffs in Ukraine.**[xviii]** As a result, popular support, a critical pillar of unconventional war, remains high in Russia. According to studies cited by the Carnegie Endowment, Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, BBC, Freedom

House, and others, Russian viewers trust the objectivity of these national TV stations, and this trust is actually rising.**[xix]** In fact, some 88 percent believe that the United States and Europe are manipulating their media in an "information war" against Russia, while their own government is simply reporting the facts.**[xx]**

It is no surprise, therefore, that Russians continue to support their government's justification for Ukrainian intervention. And while they tend to oppose escalating the conflict with NATO or deploying more Russian troops abroad, Russia's new generation warfare is designed precisely to avoid this kind of escalation.**[xxi]** Indeed, Russia's "little green men" have occupied Crimea and parts of Donbas for over two years now, and the West has given little indication it is prepared to initiate a full-scale military conflict. In fact, Europe's appetite for using even nonmilitary deterrents, like economic sanctions, is wearing thin.**[xxii]**

Lessons for the United States

Russia's new generation warfare provides several lessons for U.S. strategists. First, the United States should recognize the important of Phase Zero operations and implement psychological, informational, and other nonmilitary measures that preempt and prevent conflict. Current U.S. doctrine demonstrates a poor appreciation for this kind of warfare, which is too rigidly focused on traditional military operations. For example, the first step of "preparation" requires executive "permission to execute an unconventional warfare campaign"—as if unconventional warfare is something that can be turned on and off at a moment's notice.**[xxiii]** On the contrary, new generation warfare is a type of warfare that exists round-the-clock, using a nation's total resources to shape the operational environment. It is not a set campaign; it is a way of life. U.S. leaders must adopt this mindset.

Second, U.S. leaders must use the media to encourage patience and trust in military activities. The impulsive, fast-paced cable news cycle far outpaces the military's timeline. While CNN or Fox News may portray the loss of an airport or key building in Donetsk as a great calamity, the military knows it is just one step in the course of a long conflict that may take years to resolve. Unlike Russia, where the government and military control the narrative because they control the media outlets, U.S. media is far more independent—and it should remain so.**[xxiv]** However, U.S. officials should speak out more emphatically and frequently on these outlets, making a public case for a long-term military approach and countering the desire for quick results and decisive victories, neither of which characterize unconventional war. It should also seek to limit the rising number of leaks, which makes the military look disorganized and further divides popular opinion.

Finally, in addition to developing its own unconventional war strategy, the U.S. must grasp and counter Russia's new generation warfare with nonmilitary instruments of its own.**[xxv]** These include establishing new TV and radio stations to disseminate pro-Ukrainian propaganda in Donbas; channeling economic aid to encourage private enterprise and strengthening links between Ukraine and the West; cutting back sanctions that harm the local population and alienate popular support; and aggressively exposing Russian flaws and abuses to encourage impatience and skepticism within Russia. This new generation conflict in Ukraine is fundamentally attritive; weakening the enemy's will through these nonmilitary measures will pay large dividends in the long-run.

End Notes

[i] Phillip Karber summarizes the Russian approach thus: "Russia's new generation warfare differs from Western views of hybrid warfare?—?a blend of conventional, irregular and cyber warfare?—?in that it combines both low-end hidden state involvement with high-end direct, even braggadocio, superpower

involvement. Contrary to Western politicians, the Russian leadership understands military options and plays them like a Stradivarius." This paper will unwrap this definition and its impact on future unconventional war. See Phillip Karber, "Russia's New Generation Warfare," *National Geo-Spatial Intelligence Agency*, **https://www.nga.mil/MediaRoom/News/Pages/Russia's-'New-Generation-Warfare'.aspx**

[ii] Sun Tzu, *Art of War* (Philadelphia: Lippincot, 1862), 64.

[iii] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Peter Paret and Michael Howard (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1976), 93.

[iv] Mao Tse-Tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith II (New York: Dover Publications, 2000), 21.

[v] Ernesto "Che" Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare* (University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 56.

[vi] Berzins' assessment is based on recent Russian actions in Ukraine, as well as speeches and writings of Russian leaders translated into English, most notably that of Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov. For his original source, see Valery Gerasimov, "The Value of Science Is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat Operations," in *Voyenno-Promyshlennyy Kurier* (Jan-Feb 2016), **https://www.questia.com/library/journal/1G1-440822326/the-value-of-science-is-in-the-foresight-new-challenges**. For another lucid summary of new generation warfare, see Footnote 1.

[vii] Janis Berzins, "Russia's New Generation Warfare in Ukraine," *National Defense Academy of Latvia* (April 2014), 5. Emphasis mine.

[viii] Cited by Major Kenneth Keating, "Maskirovka: The Soviet System of Camouflage," *U.S. Army Russian Institute* (1981), 4, **http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a112903.pdf**

[ix] Berzins, 4.

[x] Kenneth Rapoza, "One Year After Russia Annexed Crimea, Locals Prefer Moscow to Kiev," *Forbes* (March 20, 2015), **http://www.forbes.com/sites/kenrapoza/2015/03/20/one-year-after-russia-annexed-crimea-locals-prefer-moscow-to-kiev/#3b8476ae5951**

[xi] Natalia Zinets, "Ukraine struggles to recruit soldiers for war in east," *Reuters* (February 4, 2016), **http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-ukraine-crisis-military-idUKKCN0VD21Q**

[xii] Christian Marxsen, "The Crimean Crisis: An International Law Perspective" (2014), 372-374, **http://www.mpil.de/files/pdf4/Marxsen_2014_-_The_crimea_crisis_-_an_international_law_perspective.pdf**

[xiii] For 90-95 percent of Russians, television is their main source of information about the events in Ukraine. See studies cited by the Carnegie Endowment at: **http://carnegieendowment.org/publications/?fa=61236**

[xiv] Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia* (Perseus Books, 2014), 5.

[xv] The top three channels collectively make up 40 percent of the TV market. Gazprom, Russia's largest private company, is heavily subsidized by the Kremlin and operates many of the smaller channels. For a complete list of media companies and their share of the market, see: **http://tinyurl.com/glagl2l**

[xvi] "Hate speech" laws give the government wide latitude to arrest and intimidate its critics. See "Dozens in Russia imprisoned for social media likes, reposts," *Associated Press* (June 2, 2016), **http://www.news.com.au/technology/online/social/dozens-in-russia-imprisoned-for-social-media-likes-reposts/news-story/9cb54ddab2810129920d560f4eb5983b**

[xvii] Andrew Higgins, "Effort to Expose Russia's 'Troll Army' Draws Vicious Retaliation," *New York Times* (May 31, 2016), **http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/31/world/europe/russia-finland-nato-trolls.html?_r=0**

[xviii] In particular, the media emphasizes four key pillars: "first, that the "conflict in Ukraine is internal; second, that the Ukrainian government is the main aggressor; third, that the Russian-speaking population is threatened and endangered by the Ukrainian government forces and volunteer right-wing battalions; and fourth, that Western powers are deliberately underplaying the harm that the Ukrainian government forces are causing in the eastern regions of the country." See "Russia's Information War Victory at Home – The Role of State Media," *Albany Associates* (October 31, 2014), **http://www.albanyassociates.com/notebook/2014/10/russias-information-war-victory-at-home-the-role-of-state-media/**

[xix] For one such study, see "Information Warfare," *Levada Center* (November 12, 2014), **http://www.levada.ru/eng/information-warfare**

[xx] Ibid.

[xxi] Thomas Sherlock, "Putin's Public Opinion Challenge," *National Interest* (August 21, 2014), **http://nationalinterest.org/feature/putins-public-opinion-challenge-11113**

[xxii] David Francis and Lara Jakes, "Sanctions are a Failure: Let's Admit That," *Foreign Policy* (April 27, 2016), **http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/04/28/sanctions-are-a-failurelets-admit-that/**

[xxiii] David Maxwell, "Russia Versus U.S. Unconventional Warfare," Class Lecture (June 13, 2016).

[xxiv] While benefiting the military, Russia's control of the media comes at a great price: the loss or restriction of basic civil liberties. Freedom House ranks Russia as "not free," awarding it low scores in not only press freedom, but freedom in the legal, political, and economic environments. See "Russia: Freedom of the Press 2015," *Freedom House*, **https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2015/russia**

[xxv] Sun Tzu's maxim that the "supreme importance in war is to attack the enemy's strategy" applies here.

About the Author

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Nicholas Fedyk is pursuing an M.A. in Security Studies at Georgetown University, where he focuses on terrorism and sub-state violence, particularly in Ukraine and Eastern Europe. He is a project associate at the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs. He earned his undergraduate degree from Georgetown's School of Foreign Service in 2014.

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