

The war in Donbas and the battle for definitions

Part 1: The problem with hybrid warfare

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In the tenth issue of last year's *Militaire Spectator*, Colonel Han Bouwmeester elaborated on the use of *maskirovka* and *reflexive control* prior to and during the planned Russian annexation of Crimea.¹ Subsequently, in the twelfth issue, Ruben Tavenier addressed the numerous concepts that have been used interchangeably to explain Russian contemporary warfare, which all significantly deviate from one another and some of which are even foreign to the Russian military lexicon.² This article about the war in Donbas appears as a sequence in two successive issues and aims to follow up on both; first, by outlining the historical development and explaining the various interpretations and misuse of the concept of *hybrid warfare* and second, by determining to what extent and according to which definition the war in Eastern Ukraine can actually be described as a hybrid war. Agreement on a generally accepted unambiguous definition of what is called hybrid warfare is a necessary precondition for both the academic and military discourse in order to be able to properly engage in a discussion on the subject.

On February 18th, 2015, several columns of Soviet-legacy vehicles were streaming into the city of Artemivsk, situated in Eastern Ukraine. Some were damaged, others were being towed and all were packed with Ukrainian troops. They had escaped the cauldron that had effectively been in place around the city of Debaltseve over the previous nine days, their chosen routes still traceable through the dozens of burning wreckages that littered the country-

side. It was the end of a Russian-backed separatist offensive, designed to encircle the Ukrainian forces occupying the bulge and major railroad junction situated along the borderline and in between the two breakaway republics of Luhansk and Donetsk. The battle marked both the high mark and the end of large-scale combat operations of a war that had started just less than a year before. Since then, at least until the recent escalation on 24 February when Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the conflict has degenerated into what American Colonel Liam Collins described as fighting 'World War One with technology',³ occupying a frontline that until recently had basically altered very little. Yet despite these apparently highly recognisable conventional combat characteristics, the Donbas War of 2014-2015, in western perception has transmuted from its inception into the archetype of hybrid warfare.

In February 2013, Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov published his famous

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- 1 Han Bouwmeester, 'The art of deception revisited (part 2): the unexpected annexation of Crimea in 2014,' *Militaire Spectator* 190 (2021) (10) 494-521. https://www.militairespectator.nl/sites/default/files/bestanden/uitgaven/Militaire_Spectator_10_2021.pdf.
- 2 Ruben Tavenier, 'Contemporary war: a Russian perspective,' *Militaire Spectator* 190 (2021) (12) 616-625. https://www.militairespectator.nl/sites/default/files/bestanden/uitgaven/MilitaireSpectator_2021_12.pdf.
- 3 Liam Collins, 'A New Eastern front: What the U.S. Army Must Learn from the War in Ukraine,' *Association of the United States Army*, April 16, 2018. <https://www.ousa.org/articles/new-eastern-front-what-us-army-must-learn-war-ukraine>.

article entitled ‘The Value of Science is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat Operations.’⁴ In it he set forth a number of changing threats and challenges confronting Russia in possible future conflicts, brought about by the changing character of warfare, resulting in a more indirect approach to war. Primarily, but not solely, this applied to the usage of non-military means and methods in shaping the battlefield prior to possible military intervention, which, in Gerasimov’s eyes, the western powers had demonstrated during the Arab Spring and the numerous Colour

Revolutions, especially in the intervention in Libya which ultimately toppled Muammar Gaddafi. Labelled as non-linear warfare, Gerasimov describes a form of future warfare taking place across the entire conflict spectrum simultaneously, transpiring from below the threshold of war up and to the conduct of large-scale conventional military operations, lacking the characteristic uninterrupted linear frontlines of previous eras. If anything, the

4 Valery Gerasimov, ‘The Value of Science Is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat Operations,’ translation Robert Coalson, *Military Review* (January/February 2016) 23-29.

*Ukrainian forces near Artemivsk
in the Donetsk region on
February 20, 2015*

PHOTO ANP/AFP, ANATOLII STEPANOV





Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu (R), President Vladimir Putin (2-R) and First Deputy Defence Minister and Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces Valery Gerasimov (front L); in some form of self-inflicted *maskirovka*, western security and defence analysts were led to read Gerasimov's article as a blue-print for a new form of Russian warfare

article was a call to members of the Russian military-academic community to help stimulate the development of military science in order to address these issues. Because most importantly, Gerasimov stated, the essence of military science is to help foresee and thus prepare for the unique characteristics and conditions of any particular possible future conflict. Thus it was not the revelation of a fixed template or a new military doctrine and it certainly did not lie at the basis of Russian operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, which at the time still had to take place one year later. If the article could tell us anything it must be that according to Gerasimov at that time Russia was perhaps lagging somewhat behind in certain areas.

Yet, in some form of self-inflicted *maskirovka*, western security and defence analysts were led to read Gerasimov's article as a blue-print for a new form of Russian warfare ultimately demonstrated by the annexation of Crimea and subsequent insurrection in Eastern Ukraine.⁵ This misinterpretation was partly, and unintentionally, created by Mark Galeotti, a British author and expert in the field of Russian military and security issues. While publishing a translated version of the original article in his blog on June 7, 2014, he added the title 'Gerasimov Doctrine,' which, from that moment on, started to live a life of its own.⁶ Soon after, the Gerasimov Doctrine became synonymous with hybrid warfare, another relatively new phrase in the military lexicon, that had first been introduced in 2002 by United States Marine Corps (USMC) Colonel (retired) William J. Nemeth, but which gained worldwide renown at the hands of USMC Lieutenant Colonel (retired) Dr. Frank Hoffman in 2007. While Nemeth initially used the term to describe the

5 Michael Kofman, 'Russian Hybrid Warfare and other Dark Arts,' *War on the Rocks*, March 11, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/03/russian-hybrid-warfare-and-other-dark-arts/>.

6 Mark Galeotti, 'I'm sorry for Creating the Gerasimov Doctrine,' *Foreign Policy*, March 5, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/05/im-sorry-for-creating-the-gerasimov-doctrine/>.

relationship between a hybrid society, combining traditional and modern state characteristics, and the resulting hybrid warfare, indicating that military organization derives from social organization, Hoffman used it in a more tangible manner.⁷ During the 2006 Israel-Lebanon War, Hezbollah had demonstrated a newly-acquired capability in partially mitigating the Israeli Defence Forces conventional and technological superiority. According to Hoffman, the primary characteristic of the hybrid form of warfare Hezbollah managed to apply so successfully, was ‘the blending and fusing of the full range of methods and modes of conflict into the battlespace.’⁸ The tactical activities and methods within this operational concept were essentially military by nature.

However, the concept soon started to expand, especially after the conflict in Ukraine erupted, to the point that it became a catch-all term encompassing all military and non-military instruments at the disposal of the state, focusing at interagency cooperation at the strategic level of war, operating across the entire political, military, economic, social, informational and infrastructure (PMESII) spectrum, with military means being deployed only in the final phase of actual combat.⁹ As Charles Bartles, co-author of *The Russian Way of War* and analyst at the Foreign Military Studies Office at Fort Leavenworth, explains, in the Russian perception U.S. led-regime change operations had over the past decades transformed from being purely military by nature towards more ‘asymmetric and indirect threats’, encompassing a wide array of non-military means to prepare a target country for eventual military intervention.¹⁰

Gerasimov’s article must be seen as a direct response to these perceived developments, i.e. the changing character of western interventions, and not the other way around, supposedly as the origin and stimuli for the Russian intervention in Ukraine, wrongfully identified as hybrid warfare. However, since the publication of Gerasimov’s article and the subsequent Russian intervention in Ukraine, the latter has become the dominant interpretation of the concept of hybrid warfare within western political, military and academic discourses. So, in the span of a few

years hybrid warfare as a concept not only grew to include almost all the coercive means available to a state, but at the same time became interchangeable with the Russian way of war, wrongfully labelled as ‘Russian hybrid warfare.’ As Michael Kofman, senior research scientist and expert on Russian military affairs, strikingly put it: ‘Hybrid warfare has become the Frankenstein of the field of Russia military analysis; it has taken on a life of its own and there is no obvious way to contain it.’¹¹

This mixed usage of dissimilar definitions prompts the question to what extent, and according to which definition, the war in Ukraine can truly be considered a hybrid war. Answering this question first of all requires defining what hybrid warfare actually is and which definition, and why, is most suitable to serve as a framework for analysis in this particular context. This is the aim of part one of this article whereas part two will subsequently translate this concept into features and search for them within the actual conduct of operations, in order to determine to what extent the 2014-2015 Donbas War can truly be considered a hybrid war.¹² At the same time a better understanding is provided of both the extent and nature of Russian military involvement, as well as of the characteristics of the actual fighting as it occurred.

Defining hybrid warfare

Over the past decades there have been numerous attempts to conceptualize the continuously and accelerating changing character of warfare,

- 7 William J. Nemeth, ‘Future War and Chechnya: a case for hybrid warfare’ (Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2002) 4.
- 8 Frank G. Hoffman, ‘Hybrid Warfare and Challenges,’ *Joint Forces Quarterly*, nr. 52 (1st quarter 2009) 36.
- 9 Patrick J. Cullen and Erik Reichborn-Kjennerud, *Understanding Hybrid Warfare* (Multinational Capability Development Campaign Countering Hybrid Warfare Project, 2017) 4.
- 10 Charles K. Bartles, ‘Getting Gerasimov Right,’ *Military Review* (January-February 2016) 33. https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20160228_art009.pdf.
- 11 Kofman, ‘Russian Hybrid Warfare and other Dark Arts.’
- 12 Part two will be published in the April 2022 issue of the *Militaire Spectator*.

deriving from new ideas or, as in most cases, from technological advancements, one of the first attempts being called *fourth generation warfare*.¹³ Its main characteristic is the blurring of boundaries between traditional dualisms as war and peace, state and non-state actors and combatants and non-combatants as well as the shift from conflict between states towards conflict between cultures.¹⁴ The ensuing *fifth generation warfare* is predominantly technology-driven, encompassing a combination of *network-centric warfare*, *multi-domain operations* and the fusion of information flows.¹⁵ Then there is the Chinese concept of *unrestricted warfare*, describing warfare in 'the age of globalization,' characterized by the rise of non-state actors in a world wherein political, economic or diplomatic means supplement or even replace military means, fighting on battlefields that lack boundaries.¹⁶ Surely all of these concepts are correct in their assessment of the changing character of warfare, as much as they are probably incomplete and overlap each other to a considerable extent. So where exactly does hybrid warfare fit in? The short and simple answer, as mentioned in the introduction, is that it depends on the

definition. There are roughly three distinctive interpretations and descriptions of the concept, the fourth being the Russification of one of those concepts.

The original hybrid warfare interpretation

The basic principle Nemeth used for his thesis is that invariably military forces reflect the society they come from and operate according to certain characteristics unique to that society and culture.¹⁷ According to Nemeth, hybrid societies are those which veer away from the modern concept of state systems, retaining certain political institutions and featuring modern technology, while at the same time encompassing, or even moving towards, more traditional forms of clan-based organization. Lacking strong central leadership, these societies tend to be highly unstable and torn by internal rivalry, creating opportunities for charismatic leadership along the way. A faltering national economy and security apparatus leads to the rise of criminal organizations, which during wartime tend to become intertwined with warlord-led fighting organizations.¹⁸ As a consequence, the particular form of warfare deriving from these hybrid societies is similarly hybrid by nature. Nemeth goes on using the Chechen Wars (1994-1996 and 1999-2009) as a case study, providing an in-depth analysis of Chechen society and subsequently Chechen military capabilities during both wars. The resulting fighting style is one that lacks strong central leadership but instead relies on solid internal social cohesion and decentralized command and control, supported by the usage of modern communication systems. Blending conventional military capabilities with classic guerrilla warfare, acts of terrorism and even using psychological warfare and information operations on the tactical and operational levels.¹⁹ Nemeth concludes that the way of warfare originating from hybrid societies reflects the norms regarding organization, accepted level of violence and willingness to sustain heavy losses, prevailing within that society. They are usually very capable of using decentralized tactics and corresponding command and control mechanisms characteristic of guerrilla warfare, but also know how to incorporate technologically

13 What is known as *First Generation Warfare* is the type of warfare that emerged after the conclusion of the Thirty Years War, which centered on armies fighting pitched battles by using line and column formations. Thereafter, advancements in firepower resulted in greater lateral distribution and the establishment of linear strategy moving towards attrition, subsequently called *Second Generation Warfare*. In order to alleviate the tactical stalemate deriving from the increase in firepower, *Third Generation Warfare* saw the shift to maneuver-based warfare, instead of trying physically to destroy an opponent focusing on breaking his ability to resist. William S. Lind, 'Understanding Fourth Generation War,' *Military Review* (September-October 2004): 12-16, <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=482203>.

14 Frank G. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: the Rise of Hybrid Wars* (Arlington: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007) 18.

15 Peter Layton, 'Fifth Generation Warfare,' *Over The Horizon*, July 31, 2017, <https://othjournal.com/2017/07/31/5th-gen-warfare/>. Network Centric Warfare aims to increase combat power through effectively linking geographically dispersed forces within the same battlespace in order to create a shared battlespace awareness through information superiority and improve and accelerate command and control capabilities. David S. Alberts, John J. Garstka and Frederick P. Stein, *Network Centric Warfare: Developing and Leveraging Information Superiority* (Washington, D.C., CCRP Publication Series, 2000) 88. Multi-Domain Operations are joint operations aimed to achieve synergetic effects across multiple domains, including land, sea, air, space and cyber.

16 Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare* (Beijing, PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House, 1999) 220-222.

17 Nemeth, 'Future War and Chechnya: a case for hybrid warfare,' 1.

18 *Ibid.* 69.

19 *Ibid.* 49 and 57.



PHOTO ANP/APF, OLEG NIKISHIN

A group of Chechen fighters in the region of Pervomaysk, 1996; William Nemeth has used the Chechen Wars (1994-1996 and 1999-2009) as a case study, providing an in-depth analysis of Chechen society and subsequently Chechen military capabilities during both wars

advanced conventional weapon systems effectively, often outside the usual doctrinal parameters they were originally designed for. This enables them to quickly adapt their tactics back and forth in rapidly changing circumstances. For example while primarily operating in a typical guerrilla fashion at certain times the Chechens just as easily demonstrated their capability in conducting large-scale conventional assaults against a strong Russian opponent. During the assault on Grozny in August 1996, 1,500 Chechen fighters under the leadership of Shamil Basajev inflicted considerable losses on 12,000 Russian troops positioned in and around the city. As a consequence, a hybrid opponent will confront its adversary with a different set of strengths and weaknesses that more advanced armies are usually focussing on, making knowledge of the opponent's society a crucial precondition for understanding the military

forces originating from that society.²⁰ Not one society is completely identical to another; however, the same can be said of their respective military organizations. In fact, when using this particular interpretation, hybrid warfare probably differs from conflict to conflict, depending on local circumstances and therefore unable to produce a predetermined set of well-defined characteristics.

Hybrid warfare as it entered the military lexicon

In 2005 then USMC General James Mattis, together with Lieutenant Colonel Frank Hoffman published an article called 'Future War: The Rise of Hybrid Wars.'²¹

²⁰ Ibid. 73-74.

²¹ Lieutenant General James N. Mattis and Lieutenant Colonel Frank Hoffman, 'Future Warfare: The Rise of Hybrid Wars,' *Proceedings Magazine* 132 (November 2005) <http://milnewstbay.pbworks.com/f/MattisFourBlockWarUSNINov2005.pdf>.

'Hybrid warfare has become the Frankenstein of the field of Russia military analysis; it has taken on a life of its own and there is no obvious way to contain it'

Complementary to the so-called *Three Block War* concept devised by former USMC Commander General Charles Krulak six years earlier, they added a *fourth block*, emphasizing the increasing application and scope of information warfare.²² They foresaw future war in which adversaries combine different 'modes and means of warfare' into what they called hybrid warfare,²³ with the added component of tactical effects magnified through effective employment of information warfare. The following year they saw their earlier observations confirmed during the 34 days of combat of the 2006 Lebanon War. Hoffman, meanwhile, continued working on the concept of hybrid warfare, identifying the new features Hezbollah displayed in battling the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF). Among these were capabilities that in previous conflicts belonged exclusively to the arsenal of state actors. This was demonstrated amongst others by the successful deployment of modern Russian-built AT-14 Kornet anti-tank missiles against Israeli Merkava tanks and the use of armed Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) of Iranian origin to strike at more distant Israeli targets. An Israeli naval

corvette was attacked and damaged by a Chinese-made C802 anti-ship cruise missile, fired from ashore. Displaying advanced Electronic Warfare (EW) capabilities and successfully implementing information warfare were integral parts of combat operations. Moreover, Hezbollah fighters also demonstrated a high level of individual training and fire discipline, as well as the ability to successfully operate in a decentralized manner. This was done mostly by adopting their usual irregular tactics, but in certain cases also by confronting the IDF in a more conventional manner.²⁴

The following year, Hoffman published his research paper *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars*. In it, he emphasized once again that future war will see the convergence of different modes of warfare into *hybrid warfare*, including both state and non-state actors, who, as a result of continuing globalization and technological developments, will further exploit the increasing proliferation of advanced military capabilities.²⁵ This resulted in the following definition: 'Hybrid Wars incorporate a range of different modes of warfare including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder.'²⁶ With the crucial addition to this definition that 'These multi-modal activities can be conducted by separate units, or even by the same unit but are generally operationally and tactically directed and coordinated within the main battlespace to achieve synergistic effects in the physical and psychological dimensions of conflict and can be gained at alle levels of war.'²⁷

This is in contrast to what Hoffman calls *compound wars*, during which both conventional and irregular components are also present, but are coordinated only at the strategic level, operating in separated operational theatres or different formations.²⁸ According to Hoffman, the Vietnam War (1955-1975) offers a prime example of this *strategic synergy* between Vietcong guerrillas and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regulars, lacking the tactical and operational direction and coordination that characterizes hybrid warfare.²⁹ This is a key

22 Krulak emphasized the increasing complexity of future operating environments where humanitarian aid missions can occur simultaneous with peacekeeping operations and mid-intensity conflict, within three adjacent blocks, stressing the ability of junior leaders to respond quickly to changing circumstances, while stressing the possible strategic consequences of their actions. Charles C. Krulak, 'The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War,' *Marines Magazine*, January, 1999, <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a399413.pdf>.

23 Mattis and Hoffman, 'Future Warfare.'

24 Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century*, 35-38.

25 Ibid. 28.

26 Ibid. 29.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid. 21.



PHOTO ANP/AFP/RONI SCHUTZER

Israeli officials show rockets that were lobbed from southern Lebanon in 2006; in his work on the concept of hybrid warfare Frank Hoffman explicitly identified the new features Hezbollah displayed in battling the Israeli Defence Forces

component of the concept of hybrid war as it was formulated by Hoffman that has often been overlooked. Over recent years, several historians have attempted to refute the image of hybrid warfare as a new phenomenon, by supposedly tracing its origins back to earlier conflicts and even to the beginnings of organized warfare itself. However, the only manner in which they were able to do so, was by expanding the definition of hybrid war until it resembled Hoffman's definition of compound war. While the historical examples they put forward indeed comprised both conventional and irregular components, they ignored the crucial complement of tactical-operational cooperation and coordination within the same battlespace, unintentionally validating Hoffman's theory in the process.³⁰

The predominant interpretation of hybrid warfare

Dr. Ofer Fridman, lecturer of War Studies at King's College London and specialized in Russian

military thought, has done extensive research into the origin of the concept of hybrid warfare.³¹ According to Fridman, NATO played an important role in expanding the original definition(s) by adding other dimensions, especially non-military, several years before Gerasimov wrote his famous article and the subsequent events in Ukraine took place. Emphasizing that hybrid threats are not an entirely new phenomenon, in 2010 NATO experts outlined the growing challenges posed by hybrid threats and defined the concept as follows: 'Hybrid threats are those posed by adversaries, with the ability to simultaneously employ conventional and non-conventional means adaptively in pursuit of their objectives ... involve adversaries (including states, rogue

30 One of the most important attempts in this regard is *Hybrid Warfare: Fighting Complex Opponents from the Ancient World to the Present*, edited by Williamson Murray and Peter Mansoor (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2012).

31 'Dr Ofer Fridman,' King's People, King's College London, accessed April 8, 2021, <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/people/dr-ofer-fridman>.

states, non-state actors or terrorist organisations) who may employ a combination of actions ... consisting of a combination of every aspect of warfare and compound the activities of multiple actors ... (including economic/financial, legal, political, social and military/security) simultaneously ... in an increasingly unconstrained operating environment ... across the entire spectrum of conflict ... in order to achieve their aims.'³²

While there certainly are parallels between NATO's definition and that of Hofmann's and, to a lesser extent, Nemeth's, it is clear that NATO's

interpretation is no longer solely limited to the deployment of military means and methods within the main physical battlespace. Fridman argues that NATO initially had a leading role within the main discourse on hybrid warfare. Recent years, however, especially following the 2014 annexation of Crimea, have seen an enormous amount of research carried out on the topic, the vast majority of which synonymizes hybrid warfare with 'Russian hybrid warfare.'³³ However, as previously described, the Russians themselves consider hybrid warfare as a distinctively western approach to war, demonstrated through a number of regime change operations in order to install democracy. These operations ranged from full scale military operations like the bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003 to more cost-effective interventions using the 'whole of government' approach, like those against Libya in 2011, the Arab Spring (2010-2012) and the

32 Rep. Bi-SC Input to a New NATO Capstone Concept for the Military Contribution to Countering Hybrid Threats. Mons: SHAPE, 2010. https://www.act.nato.int/images/stories/events/2010/20100826_bi-sc_cht.pdf.

33 Ofer Fridman, 'The Danger of 'Russian Hybrid Warfare'', *Cicero Foundation Great Debate Paper* No. 17/05, 2017, 8-9. https://www.cicerofoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/Ofer_Fridman_The_Danger_of_Russian_Hybrid_Warfare.pdf.

Captured Vietcong fighters, 1965; according to Hoffman, the Vietnam War offers a prime example of strategic synergy between guerrillas and North Vietnamese Army regulars, lacking the tactical and operational direction and coordination that characterizes hybrid warfare

PHOTO UPI



various Colour Revolutions over the past two decades.³⁴ Moscow also believes that the West is currently actively engaged in a hybrid war against Russia, which has a profound impact on the image of the character of future war within Russia and forces it to be able to respond in a similar manner, encouraging Gerasimov in 2013 to devote an article to the topic. According to Lieutenant Colonel (retired) Timothy L. Thomas, analyst at the Foreign Military Studies Office at Fort Leavenworth and author of multiple books on the Russian military, 'There have been very few references to hybrid war by Russian officers, and, when used, they refer to the term as a Western concept, not a Russian one.'³⁵ However, while in western interpretations of 'Russian hybrid warfare' the emphasis has primarily been on activities below the threshold of war, Russians themselves define 'Western hybrid warfare' in those few references as '... a strategic-level effort to shape the governance and geostrategic orientation of a target state in which all actions, up to and including the use of conventional military forces in regional conflicts, are subordinate to an information campaign.'³⁶ So basically, from a western point of view, Gerasimov's article and the annexation of Crimea in particular, served to expand the original concept of hybrid warfare and identify it as something called 'Russian hybrid warfare'. While at the same time the Russian military from their perspective identified a change in the western approaches to war, to which they likewise attached the distinctly western label of hybrid warfare by in turn retrieving it from the western discourse on the Russian conduct of war. Meanwhile, the Russians themselves devised a concept called *new generation warfare*, which was influenced by a combination of both western and Russian approaches to war, displaying certain elements that are also part of western definitions of *hybrid warfare*. These elements will be explained further on.

To complicate matters even further, this predominant and expanded interpretation of *hybrid warfare* significantly overlaps with several other, mostly older, concepts of alternative forms of conflict some of which have already been mentioned above, indicating that it is not

that innovatory after all. For example, during the Interbellum, the famous British military theorist Basil Liddell Hart had already devised what he called the 'strategy of indirect approach.' Published first in his 1929 work *The decisive wars of history*, whose title changed to *The strategy of indirect approach* in 1941 and on which he further elaborated in his most influential book *Strategy*, published in 1954. In it, he defined what he called *grand strategy*, its role being to 'coordinate and direct all the resources of a nation, or band of nations, towards the attainment of the political object of the war.'³⁷ Moreover, he continued: 'Fighting power is but one of the instruments of grand strategy – which should take account of and apply the power of financial pressure, of diplomatic pressure, of commercial pressure, and, not least of ethical pressure, to weaken the opponents will.'³⁸ Its primary objective was to limit the actual deployment of military resources to a minimum. Liddell Hart goes on to separate grand strategy from the original concept of strategy as being 'the art of the general.'³⁹ Clearly Liddell Hart's concept of grand strategy significantly resembles NATO's definition as described above. It has to be borne in mind of course that the available means have significantly increased since then due to globalisation and technological advancements, in particular in the field of global communications.

Just a couple of years after the Second World War, in 1948, U.S. diplomat and political scientist George Kennan introduced a similar concept called *political warfare*, which he defined as 'the employment of all the means at a nation's command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives,'⁴⁰ ranging from 'Overt

34 Kofman, 'Russian Hybrid Warfare and other Dark Arts.'

35 Timothy L. Thomas, *Russia Military Strategy: Impacting 21st Century Reform and Geopolitics* (Fort Leavenworth, Foreign Military Studies Office, 2015) 85.

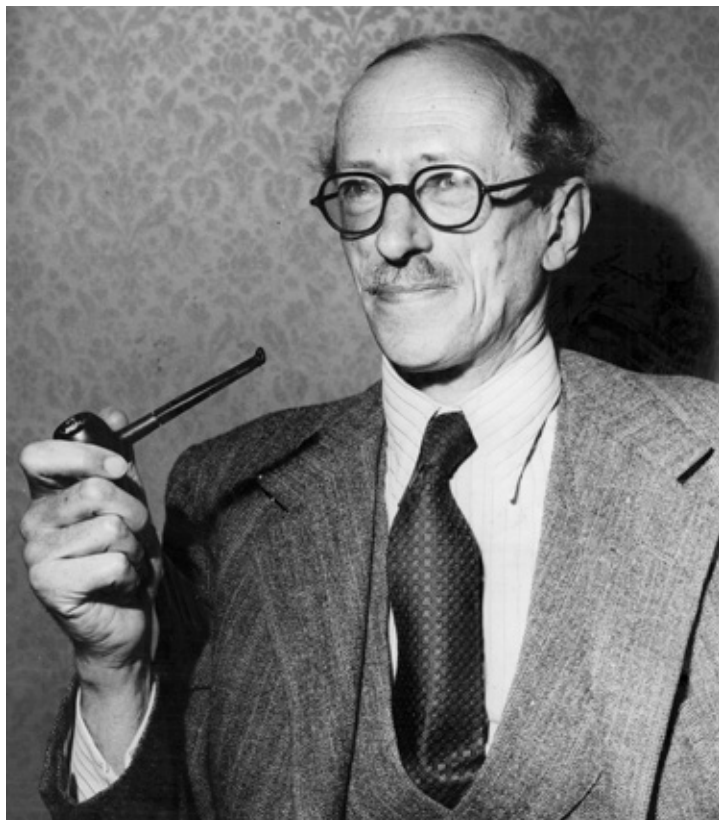
36 Mason Clark, 'Russian Hybrid Warfare,' *ISW Military Learning and the Future of War Series* (September, 2020) 8. <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/russian-hybrid-warfare>.

37 B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (London, Faber & Faber, 1967) 322.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 George F. Kennan, 'The Inauguration of Organized Political Warfare,' April 30, 1948. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114320>.



In his influential book *Strategy*, published in 1954, Basil Liddell Hart (1895-1970) defined what he called grand strategy

actions as political alliances, economic measures, and white propaganda to such covert operations as clandestine support of friendly foreign elements, black psychological warfare and even encouragement of underground resistance in hostile states.⁴¹ Again, the resemblance is evident, although political warfare includes everything just short of actual open warfare, which mirrors yet another modern concept called grey zone conflict, which is defined as ‘competitive interactions among

and within state and non-state actors that fall between the traditional war and peace duality.’⁴² What NATO’s understanding of hybrid warfare and Liddell Hart’s grand strategy in particular do have in common, as opposed to political warfare, is that although they primarily operate in this grey zone, they also both ultimately cross the threshold of actual warfare.

Hybrid war as synonymous with Russian hybrid war

If anything resembles what by western analysts has – mistakenly – been labelled as Russian hybrid warfare, it is the indigenous Russian concept called new generation warfare. Not surprisingly, it displays certain similarities with the western concept of hybrid warfare, so these characteristics can be attributed to both concepts, which perhaps is one of the main causes of the misinterpretations surrounding hybrid warfare.

The phrase new generation warfare first appeared in 2012 and was explained in an article written by S.A. Chekinov and S.G. Bogdanov that was published in the *Journal of Military Thought* the following year.⁴³ This was a term coined specifically to describe Russian population-centric warfare with a strong focus on emerging information technologies, aimed towards winning the battle of perception, by controlling information and using psychological warfare against an adversary. Its main purpose was to achieve the political objectives, while reducing the use of actual military means to a minimum.⁴⁴ It is an adaptable concept, consisting of five basic elements, i.e. *asymmetric warfare*, *low-intensity conflict*, *sixth-generation warfare*, *network-centric warfare* and *reflexive control*. These components can be used in different proportions, depending on the situation.

The first and most important element is asymmetric warfare, indicating the indirect and varying proportions regarding the means and methods that are used, for example, the deployment of both regular and irregular forces, or combining military and non-military means.⁴⁵ Non-military measures not only serve to reduce the possibility of engaging in hostile activities,

41 Ibid.

42 Philip Kapusta, ‘Grey Zone,’ *Special Warfare* (October-December, 2015) 20. <https://www.soc.mil/SWCS/SWmag/archive/SW2804/GrayZone.pdf>.

43 Thomas, *Russia Military Strategy*, 87.

44 Jānis Bērziņš, ‘Not ‘Hybrid’ but New Generation Warfare,’ in: *Russia’s Military Strategy and Doctrine*, ed. Glen E. Howard and Matthew Czekaj (Washington, D.C., The Jamestown Foundation, 2019) 165-166. Thomas, *Russia Military Strategy*, 87.

45 Jānis Bērziņš, ‘The Theory and Practice of New Generation Warfare: The Case of Ukraine and Syria,’ *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* Vol. 33, No. 3 (2020) 359-360.

but also to reduce the amount of hostile activities once the threshold of war has been crossed.⁴⁶

Low-intensity conflict aims to destabilize a target country by igniting or fueling an internal conflict through information operations, with the purpose of influencing the national and cultural identity of the local population, followed by the support of local separatist movements and subsequently a possible military intervention.⁴⁷

In the 1990s the Russian General Vladimir Slipchenko developed his own generational classification of the evolution of warfare, of which the current sixth-generation warfare primarily aims at 'destroying the enemy's economic potential...' and 'keeping the man outside of the battlespace.'⁴⁸ Together with improved modern Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities, the widescale deployment of long-range precision weaponry led to the introduction of yet another concept called *non-contact warfare* as a key component of Slipchenko's sixth-generation warfare.⁴⁹ It stresses the need for improved situational awareness through deployment of remote sensors like UAV's, the ability to quickly transform information into usable intelligence and to conduct long-range precision fires.⁵⁰ It creates an important role for the use of aerospace forces and electronic warfare systems.⁵¹

Network-centric warfare utilizes decentralized command and control, providing more autonomy for combined arms formations up to brigade level. This enables them to operate independently on the battlefield by the use of a single shared information space, combining intelligence and psychological operations with electronic and information warfare.⁵² According to Chekinov and Bogdanov 'it is a concept of control over combat operations as a new way of directing armed forces.'⁵³

Finally, reflexive control is a method that was developed in the Soviet Union during the Cold War, which aims to influence the enemy's decision-making process by providing the opponent with information in a controlled manner, in order to make a prearranged decision which favors the initiator.⁵⁴

Because the definition used by NATO correctly speaks of hybrid threats instead of hybrid warfare, it would be recommendable to use this distinction to further separate the concept of *hybrid conflict* from that of *hybrid warfare* in much the same way as Liddell Hart differentiated between *grand strategy* and *strategy*

All in all, new generation warfare is a Russian approach to the evolution of warfare, combining the Russian understanding of certain western concepts like low-intensity conflict and network-centric warfare, blended with their own concepts of sixth-generation warfare and reflexive control. Their main purpose is to create a unified view of modern warfare that brings together all the elements of the changing character of warfare. In doing so, it is not surprising that certain elements overlap with other concepts that aspire to achieve the same effect, including hybrid warfare. Most importantly, however, compared to the predominant western interpretation of hybrid warfare, within new generation warfare, the deployment of military means constitutes a much larger

46 S.G. Chekinov and S.A. Bogdanov, 'On the Nature and Content of Wars of a New Generation,' *Military Thought*, No. 10 (2013) 16-17.

47 Bērziņš, 'The Theory and Practice of New Generation Warfare,' 362-363.

48 Chekinov and Bogdanov, 'On the Nature and Content of Wars of a New Generation,' 14.

49 Bērziņš, 'The Theory and Practice of New Generation Warfare,' 364-366; Gerasimov, 'The Value of Science Is in the Foresight,' 24-25.

50 Brandon C. Kasubaski, 'Exploring the Foundation of Multi-Domain Operations,' *Small Wars Journal* (November 13, 2019) accessed April 27, 2021. <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/exploring-foundation-multi-domain-operations>.

51 Bērziņš, 'The Theory and Practice of New Generation Warfare,' 364-366.

52 Idem, 366-367.

53 Chekinov and Bogdanov, 'On the Nature and Content of Wars of a New Generation,' 17.

54 Bērziņš, 'The Theory and Practice of New Generation Warfare,' 368-369.

proportion. Phillip Karber, President of the Potomac Foundation and a Russian military expert, who repeatedly visited the frontline in Eastern Ukraine, is convinced that with regard to new generation warfare 'This emerging strategy has been both under-appreciated and misunderstood – often muddled with our own constructs of fourth generation warfare; or non-linear warfare, or hybrid warfare.'⁵⁵

Determining the appropriate definition

So what is called Russian hybrid warfare is basically a western military theoretical framework projected on the Russian conduct of operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, making it essentially non-existent as a concept. Although, as stated before, there will of course be corresponding characteristics between the western concepts of hybrid warfare and Russian new generation warfare.

The socio-cultural definition basically renders itself unsuitable because its manifestations are area-dependent and will most likely vary from one conflict to another and therefore, per definition, cannot serve as a predefined framework. Besides this, Ukraine is obviously not a hybrid society, since as a country it entirely functions in accordance with the modern concept of a state system. The sole possible exception are perhaps the Cossacks, who participate on both sides of the conflict. However, there is considerable overlap with Hoffman's military definition when it comes to blending conventional military capabilities with classic guerrilla warfare, acts of terrorism, psychological warfare and information operations on the tactical and operational levels of war.

Although at first glance NATO's definition seems to be the most complete, there are several arguments against its use. Firstly, it overlaps too much with existing older concepts in order to be regarded as new way of warfare. It simply applies new means into existing older concepts as a result of globalisation and technological advances, creating new possibilities within these existing frameworks. Secondly, as the preceding paragraphs have illustrated, there is no clear consensus regarding the delineation of the expanded definition as depending on the situation it simply seems to include everything, making it unsuitable as a framework for analysis. Thirdly and probably most importantly it focusses primarily on conflict short of actual war. Therefore it is perhaps not the best definition to search for elements that are part of something called 'warfare.'⁵⁶ To put in Hoffman's own words, 'Warfare has been used by military scholars to address the physical conduct of war or the fighting and violent aspects of war ... there is no warfare as we know it in these political and economic activities ... if it's short of war, then it's not warfare.'⁵⁷

A similar view was expressed by Russian General M.A. Gareyev, former President of the Academy of Military Sciences, when he wrote that 'It has always been held that any confrontation without resort to arms is struggle and pursuit of policies by physical force and armed violence is war.'⁵⁸ Because the definition used by NATO correctly speaks of hybrid threats instead of hybrid warfare, it would be recommendable to use this distinction to further separate the concept of *hybrid conflict* from that of hybrid warfare in much the same way as Liddell Hart differentiated between *grand strategy* and *strategy*. Hybrid conflict concerning the full range of capabilities available to a state, operating across the entire conflict spectrum and hybrid warfare indicating the blending of military modes and methods within the same battlespace. Although Nemeth's interpretation of hybrid warfare is the original concept, it was Hoffman's description that permanently entered it into the military lexicon. More importantly, this definition addresses contemporary developments in warfare itself instead of applying new means to existing older

55 Phillip Karber, *Lessons Learned from the Russo-Ukrainian War* (Potomac Foundation, 2015), 1, <https://nsiteam.com/social/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/NS-D-10367-Learning-Lessons-from-Ukraine-Conflict-Final.pdf>.

56 As Fridman emphasizes; '... conceptualisations of non-military confrontations as wars perplex the military leadership, simply because most of the required actions and counter-actions do not fall under military responsibility.' Fridman, 'The Danger of 'Russian Hybrid Warfare,' 14.

57 Frank Hoffman, 'On Not-So-New Warfare: Political Warfare VS Hybrid Threats,' *War on the Rocks*, July 28, 2014. <https://warontherocks.com/2014/07/on-not-so-new-warfare-political-warfare-vs-hybrid-threats/>.

58 Chekinov and Bogdanov, 'On the Nature and Content of Wars of a New Generation,' 12.

concepts. It also offers the best described and delineated definition and is therefore the most suitable concept to serve as a framework for analysis.

Conclusion

The original concept as devised by William Nemeth pertains to the relationship between what he called hybrid societies and hybrid warfare resulting from it. Due to Frank Hoffman's concept the term came into widespread use, focussing on the blending of different modes of warfare into the same battlespace. Both concepts share certain characteristics, like combining conventional military capabilities with classic guerrilla warfare, acts of terrorism and even psychological warfare and information operations on the tactical and operational levels of war. Thereafter, a wide array of other non-military components were added, transforming hybrid warfare into a catch-all term, encompassing nearly all aspects of national power. Which, as it turns out, is actually not that new as a concept.

After the swift Russian annexation of Crimea, followed by the insurrection in the Donbas region, many western analysts were quick to point to Gerasimov's article, written in 2013, as a blueprint for Russia's supposedly revolutionary new kind of warfare. In this way, the article acted as a catalyst in the process of linking the originally western concept(s) of hybrid warfare to the Russian conduct of operations in Ukraine, ultimately attaching Gerasimov's name to a basically non-existing doctrine, or at least not one carrying the name hybrid warfare. It is not a matter of dispute whether Russia during the conflict in Eastern Ukraine used both military and non-military means. Nor is it surprising that these especially non-military aspects correspond with the most commonly (mis)used broader interpretations of hybrid warfare. The fact remains, however, that *hybrid warfare*, whatever the interpretation, is a western concept that, although bearing strong resemblances, at the same time significantly deviates from the Russian concept of new generation warfare. So as a framework for analysing the



PHOTO: NATO

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg speaks at the official inauguration of the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats in Finland; NATO's interpretation is not solely limited to the deployment of military means and methods within the main physical battlespace

Russian way of warfare in Ukraine, certain aspects of the manner in which this type of warfare is conducted are bound to be overlooked.

Nonetheless, at least when adhering to the phrase hybrid warfare in describing the violent conduct of war, the concept as defined by Hoffman offers the best framework for analysis. Thus, in the second part of this article Hofmann's concept will be broken down into its distinctive features, which will then be searched for in the principle phase of the Donbas War, lasting from the beginning of hostilities in April 2014 until the end of major combat operations in February 2015. The main aspects concern the Russian-backed separatist forces' organization and composition, the means at their disposal, as well as the level of skills required to successfully operate these means, translated into increased capabilities and, finally, the extent to which these forces and their actions are tactically or operationally integrated, directed and coordinated. ■