

## The Primitivization of Future Major Warfare Lukas Milevski

Working group: strategy

Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 and the resulting high intensity warfare have revealed to Western nations the inadequacy, partially or entirely, of their defense policies to prepare their armed forces for major warfare in an era of increasing great power competition and potential conflict. Everything, from manpower to armor, ammunition stockpiles, and all the rest, is basically insufficient for major warfare. Such conclusions are being integrated into existing on-going debates about what future warfare will look like, with some observers, such as David Petraeus, suggesting that "with a few exceptions, Ukraine is not the future of warfare", immediately continuing with the observation that "[i]n large measure, it is what we would have seen had the Cold War turned hot in the mid-1980s – with largely Cold War weapons systems (albeit with some modernization)." The exceptions he identifies includes drones and fire-and-forget missiles. He further asserts that any future great power war would have all this and more, and at higher levels of technological capability and sophistication.<sup>1</sup>

Yet this ignores a significant dynamic of the on-going war, one which has been present in sustained major warfare since at least the Second World War, and which has hardly, if at all, been noticed by Western strategists but which is vital to anticipating future warfare accurately: that sustained major warfare primitivizes the militaries that fight. This is a key issue with which the strategic and defense debate needs to engage.

The primitivization of a military force in sustained warfare is a multi-faceted phenomenon. It is partly technological: due to the slow manufacture of modern military technology, as attrition accrues through and across operations, militaries find their stocks of comparatively higher-tech equipment running low. It is partly human and social: due to attrition, the social bonds within a soldier's primary group are likely to fray and may even be totally destroyed. Weakened social bonds erodes mutual trust, unit cohesion, and, ultimately, tactical effectiveness. It is also partly organizational: due to the attrition of technology and trained manpower, the ability of formations as military organizations to perform tactically and participate in operations is impaired. At worst, organizations break down and new, ad hoc organizational models emerge. The historical exemplar of a military suffering primitivization in all three ways is the German army on the eastern front during the Second World War. All three also contributed to the overall barbarization of the war.<sup>2</sup> The Russian army is presently suffering this same process of primitivization in Ukraine, and there are episodes when it became apparent in their tactical conduct on the battlefield.

The West as a whole has not had to worry about the overall primitivization of its armed forces since the Second World War—if ever—although at times Western militaries have suffered partial primitivization (such as during the Vietnam War when the US Army suffered substantial human/social primitivization, for example, albeit largely

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Bergen. "Gen. David Petraeus: How the war in Ukraine will end", *CNN* 14 February 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/02/14/opinions/petraeus-how-ukraine-war-ends-bergen-ctpr/index.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Omer Bartov. *The Eastern Front 1941-45, German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 1986).

because of its own manpower policies). Yet the consequence of this kinder military history is that in recent decades the West has invested nearly exclusively in high technology, low-mass armed forces. Apart from, probably, the US military, Western militaries are at best glass cannons, and merely glass at worst, and in either case with no ability to reconstitute themselves quickly or effectively in the face of substantial attrition.

This tendency to primitivize matters because, despite a certain degree of popular public triumphalism about Russian military performance in the on-going war, it is not at all clear that Western militaries would perform significantly better.<sup>3</sup> In sustained major future warfare, primitivization seems just as likely to afflict the comparatively small Western militaries. While generally technologically superior to their potential great power foes, and possibly be tactically superior, they may suffer primitivization at a slower rate; but, due to their reliance on high-tech and low mass, any degree of primitivization will afflict them disproportionately more than their enemies. Future modern warfare, despite the technological visions of analysts such as Petraeus, can never be exclusively high tech.

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<sup>3</sup> David Johnson. “Would We Do Better? Hubris and Validation in Ukraine”, *War on the Rocks* 31 May 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/05/would-we-do-better-hubris-and-validation-in-ukraine/>.