

Does the Russian Intervention in Crimea in 2014 Demonstrate the New Way of War?

Adéla Klečková
King's College London

Abstract

The concept of hybrid warfare is understood, itself, as a “new way of war”, and it is argued that how the concept is defined and perceived is, to a large extent, geopolitically contingent. Indeed, what constitutes hybrid warfare, and by extension what constitutes the “new way of war,” is different in both Russian and Western military doctrines. Consequently, and congruently neither perspective demonstrates a wholly “new” way of war. These findings will be further demonstrated by an assessment of the annexation of Crimean Peninsula from both a Russian and Western perspective, deciding, whether or not it constitutes an example of hybrid warfare.

Keywords: Russia, Ukraine, Hybrid Warfare, Disinformation, Cyber Security, Colourful Revolutions

Introduction

“Every age has its own kind of war, its own limiting conditions and its own peculiar preconceptions.”

- Carl von Clausewitz

A deep irony is embedded in the term ‘hybrid warfare’ being applied to the activities the Kremlin uses against its adversaries in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). The Kremlin employs this concept to confuse its enemies and to create a false perception that Russia is more capable, powerful, and militarily superior to the West. Similarly, the term ‘hybrid warfare’ sounds novel, innovative and sophisticated and feeds into this false image immensely. Yet the term is two decades old and to this day there is no unified agreement on what it really stands for. Donald Stoker, describes it, quite accurately, as

“an example of poorly constructed theoretical approaches that cloud our judgement and feeds a dangerous tendency to confuse boundaries between war and peace.”¹

Yet the term ‘hybrid warfare’ is the label of choice made by the Western elites, to describe hostile actions to confuse and undermine the West. And despite efforts of many prominent political and military thinkers, this false image of ‘hybrid warfare’ to this day not only prevails but grows in power. Thus, it is a great irony.

Similarly, to many, also this author argues that ‘hybrid warfare’ is an ambiguous and overused buzzword referring to a military concept which is not modern at all. Nevertheless, to amend the existing body of knowledge, a novel perspective will be presented here, explaining the understanding of ‘hybrid warfare’ differs among the global actors. This is partially a result of geopolitical division (NATO vs. Russia) but partially also a result of roles these actors play

¹ Donald Stoker, “Blurred Lines: Gr ed Lines: Gray-Zone Conflict and Hybrid W one Conflict and Hybrid War—Two Failures of American Strategic Thinking.” *Naval War College Review*. 73. No. 1 (Winter 2020): 3. <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=8092&context=nwc-review>

in the ongoing hybrid war where Russia plays the offensive role of an aggressor while NATO is in the defensive role of a paralysed victim. This will be demonstrated by comparing the differences between understanding of ‘hybrid warfare’ between these two actors, while still arguing that neither of these perspectives constitutes a new way of war.

This article proceeds as follows. First, ‘hybrid warfare’ is introduced as a theoretical concept with emphasis put on its ambiguity. Subsequently the concept is defined from both NATO, as well as a Russian point of view to demonstrate the difference in perceptions as well as the overall ambiguity of the term as such. The 2014 annexation of Crimean Peninsula is generally considered to be the most prominent demonstration of ‘hybrid warfare’ as the new way of war. Thus, the military concept employed during this operation will be assessed in more detail in the second section to ultimately determine, whether it does classify as an example of ‘hybrid warfare’ from both - Russian and NATO - perspectives. The third section will subsequently present a number of empirical cases from military history prior to the annexation of Crimea assessing whether these previous examples also meet the criteria of ‘hybrid warfare’ operations. If such cases are found, they will serve as ultimate evidence that the military concept known this day as ‘hybrid warfare’ has been employed before the 2014 annexation and thus the case of Crimea (and consequently ‘hybrid warfare’ does not demonstrate a new way of war in the present.

Defining ‘Hybrid Warfare’

There are many different interpretations of ‘hybrid warfare’ across the globe and this concept is deeply embedded in military doctrines of a number of countries - Iran, China and Russia to list a few. Broadly speaking, this concept can be described as a form of mixed-methods involving multiplicity of strategies, methods and actors. Nevertheless, there is no internationally approved unified definition of it as the differences of understanding are too great. For example, unlike its US allies, the European Union, putting a great emphasis on the non-military aspect of it, does not define ‘hybrid warfare’ as an actual warfare but as

“the mixture of coercive and subversive activity, conventional and unconventional methods which can be used in a coordinated manner by state or non-state actors to achieve specific objectives while remaining below the threshold of formally declared warfare.”²

Consequently, the concept of ‘hybrid warfare’ is confusing, incoherent, ubiquitous and therefore impossible to categorize. Does ‘hybrid warfare’ even meet the criteria of a warfare? Cox argues, saying that it is not and that more accurate, yet substantially less marketable label would be “convergent trends in tactics.” Unfortunately, the ongoing discussions whether ‘hybrid warfare’ is a tactic or possibly a strategy remains inconclusive. Warfare, on the contrary, is defined as making an act of war, thus does employment of ‘hybrid warfare’ against a state actor constitute a (hybrid) war? Using Clausewitz's very broad and blunt definition, “*war is an act of violence intended to compel our opponent to fulfil our will,*” one would tend to agree. Especially since a similar definition, emerging during the conference by NATO Defence College ‘NATO and New Ways of Warfare: Defeating Hybrid Threats’ is

² European Commission, “Joint Framework on Countering Hybrid Threats,” *European Commission*. April 6, 2016.

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO_16_1250.

*“strategic in its ambition and employs a mix of disinformation, destabilising gambits and intimidation to force an adversary to comply with those interests. The essential purpose of hybrid warfare is to keep adversary politically, militarily and societally off-balance.”*³

Nevertheless, the report from the 2015 conference continues, by further defining ‘hybrid warfare’ as *“a generic form of warfare, by which illiberal power seeks to paralyse the policy and action of liberal states by attacking their open societies.”*⁴ This normative dimension of ‘hybrid warfare’ is rather novel yet seems to be logical - authoritarian regimes are better equipped to coordinate instruments of national power. Nevertheless, ascription of ‘hybrid warfare’ to illiberal state and non-state actors gives it a clear negative connotation, which might, in the long term, prove to be a self-defeating strategy. On the other hand, paralysis of policy actions seems to be indeed a rather fitting description of NATO response to growing Russian aggression, which goes directly against Clausewitz's interaction in war. *“War is not the action of a living force against a lifeless mass, but always a collision of two living forces.”*⁵ Thus, if neither NATO nor the EU responds to the Kremlin aggression, how can this be a war?

Indeed, trying to identify the red line between international competition and war is one of the most pressing questions of the 21st century and this author believes that the answer is far more complex than this. Therefore, it is paramount trying to understand the differences between the Western as well as the Russian perception of ‘hybrid warfare’ - because the way the term is defined determines how states respond to it and which government agencies are involved in countering it.

Hybrid Warfare

The term ‘hybrid warfare’ is of American origin and, being used for the first time in Robert Walker’s unpublished master’s thesis in 1998 - over two decades old. The term was publicly used for the first time by Frank Hoffman in 2005. Hoffman laid the grounds for Western understanding of ‘hybrid warfare’ and his book published 2007 - *Conflict in the 21st Century* - is considered to be the most influential work in this area.

*“Hybrid warfare incorporates a full range of different modes of warfare including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder.”*⁶

Hoffman was influenced by the Israel-Hezbollah war in 2006 when formulating his thoughts on ‘hybrid warfare’ thus he considers this conflict to be a perfect example of a hybrid war. For Russians, the perfect example is the colourful revolutions. Interestingly enough, both Russia and NATO consider different conflicts as early examples of successful hybrid war. This can be considered as one of the root causes for the different understanding of this method between these two actors which will be more elaborated in the third section.

Yet even at the dawn of the ‘hybrid warfare’ debate, there were sceptics disputing its novelty. *“The challenges (US military has to face) are archetypes. None of the four -*

³ Julian Lindley-French, “NATO and New Ways of Warfare: Defeating Hybrid Threats.” *NDC Conference Report.*” May 19, 2015. <https://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=814>.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976, 77.

⁶ Frank Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars*. Arlington: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007, 8.

traditional, irregular, catastrophic or disruptive - exist in a pure form,” claims Nathan Freier.⁷ Hence, while Hoffman understands ‘hybrid warfare’ as a novel and special category of irregular warfare, Freier, similarly to the author of this present essay sees hybridity as an ever-present condition. Furthermore, he refuses the term ‘hybrid warfare’ since it implies military character hybrid threat and proposes, ‘hybrid challenges’ which captures hybridity stemming from a combination of military and non-military components. After the 2014 annexation of Crimea, Hoffman admits that the problem with his ‘hybrid warfare’ definition is that “*it focuses on combinations of tactics associated with violence and warfare but completely fails to capture other non-violent actions.*”⁸

The US Army uses the official definition of a ‘hybrid warfare’ to be “*diverse and dynamic combination of regular forces, irregular forces, and/or criminal elements all unified to achieve mutually benefitting effects.*”⁹ Conclusively, western thinkers perceive ‘hybrid warfare’ primarily as a combination of different modes of warfare. Hybrid wars can be conducted by both, state or non-state actors, by separate units or by one unit, but generally, operationally, and tactically directed and coordinated within the battle space to achieve synergistic effect in physical and mental dimensions of conflict. The most important difference between Russian understanding here is that the conflict is declared. The boundaries of the scope of conflict and the battlefield remain clearly stated, the kinetic means have priority to the non-military means which are employed strictly within the boundaries of the actual military conflict.

New Generation Warfare

Shifts in means and domains are not new to Russian operational concepts. Since 1920, the Russian military concepts involved in five distinct periods, while foundations of operational art largely remained the same. The last shift towards non-military means and non-traditional domains in the operational concept started in 2000. Indeed, already in 2003, Russia released a white paper, the vital concept was swift destruction or control of communications, economics, infrastructure and political command to disrupt command and control of the enemy with the use of proxy forces both on land and in the cyber domain.¹⁰

Consequently, Gerasimov used both of the conflicts in Estonia and Georgia in 2008 as testing laboratories and was the first to describe a framework for the operational concept based on the lessons learned. In his article “The value of science in foresight” published in February 2013 where Gerasimov gave his view on the operational environment and what a future war might look like.¹¹ Almost two years later, in December 2014, the Kremlin released a new military doctrine which was heavily based on Gerasimov's thoughts. Nevertheless, as Gerasimov admits himself, the idea of an undeclared war has been alive already in 1914, in the work of leading Soviet thinker George Isserson who wrote that,

“*war is not declared at all. It simply starts with a pre-deployed military force.*”¹²

⁷ Nathan Freier, *Strategic competition and resistance in the 21st century: irregular, catastrophic, traditional, and hybrid challenges in context*. Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2007, 47.

⁸ 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/>.

⁹ U. S. Army, “Training Circular 7-100: Hybrid Threat.” *Department of the Army, Headquarters Washington, DC*. November, 2010. 5. https://armypubs.army.mil/ProductMaps/PubForm/Details.aspx?PUB_ID=100556.

¹⁰ A. J. C. Selhorst, “Russia’s Perception Warfare.” *Militaire Spectator*. April 22, 2016.

<https://www.militairespectator.nl/thema/strategie-operaties/artikel/russias-perception-warfare>.

¹¹ Valery Gerasimov, ‘The value of science in anticipation,’ *VPK news*, February 27, 2014. <http://www.vpk-news.ru/articles/14632>.

¹² Georgii S. Isserson, *The Evolution of Operational Art*. Fort Leavenworth: Combar Studies Institute Press, 2013, 67-69.

Gerasimov built up on Isserson thoughts and added the application of asymmetric and indirect actions by military-civilian components, special operations forces and hi-tech weapons.

Compared to the Western ‘hybrid warfare,’ Russian ‘new generation warfare’ is more complex and politically led form of contestation. Indeed, ‘new generation warfare,’ even though it includes a military component, should be primarily treated as non-military and non-kinetic warfare. Three main, distinct features can be identified:

- i) war as an ongoing permanent conflict
- ii) employment of non-state actors
- iii) emphasise on non-kinetic operations and information warfare. Indeed, according to Gerasimov:

“a perfectly thriving state can, in a matter of months and even days, be transformed into an arena of fierce armed conflict, become a victim of foreign intervention, and sink into a web of chaos, humanitarian catastrophe, and civil war.”¹³

The first principle of ‘new generation warfare’ seems to be the most important and the most discussed one - wars are no longer declared and, having begun, proceed according to an unfamiliar template. Indeed, the notion of permanent war is interesting, since it denotes the existence of a permanent enemy. In the current geopolitical structure, the clear enemy is Western civilisation, its values, culture, political system and ideology. Nevertheless the concept of Russia being at ‘war’ with ‘Western values,’ suggests that Russia has returned to a Soviet-era style battle of ideas with the West where, to paraphrase Clausewitz, peace is essentially a continuation of war by other means.¹⁴ This again supports the notion that Russian current military doctrine is to a large extent an adaptation of the Soviet-era methods implemented in the operational environment of the 21st century.

The second principle - employment of non-state actors is not limited only to irregular proxy or commercial forces such as guerrilla, terrorists, insurgent mercenaries. Indeed, cultivating ethnic Russian minorities is only the tip of the iceberg. Russia and especially its intelligence agencies foster relations with a wide spectrum of non-states actors from political lobbyists, tame journalists to hackers, a whole range of parastate proxies can be activated and deployed in the pursuit of a political victory.

The third important difference between ‘hybrid warfare,’ and ‘new generation warfare’ is that the Russian view of modern warfare is based on the idea that the main battle-space is in the mind and, as a result, ‘hybrid warfare’ is dominated by information and psychological warfare in order to reduce the necessity for deploying hard military power, and encouraging the opponents’ military and civil population to support the attacker, to the detriment of their own government and country.¹⁵ As a centerpoint of operation planning, are influence operations, while all means must be employed in order to be successful.

¹³ Gerasimov, “The value of science in anticipation.”

¹⁴ James Wither, “Making Sense of Hybrid Warfare.” *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 15. No. 2 (2016): 81-82. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26326441>.

¹⁵ Jānis Bērziņš, “Russia’s New Generation Warfare in Ukraine: Implications for Latvian Defense Policy,” *National Defence Academy of Latvia Center for Security and Strategic Research*. Paper No. 2 (April 2014): 5, <https://sldinfo.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/New-Generation-Warfare.pdf>.

Case Study: Intervention in Crimea

The annexation of Crimea is generally considered a textbook example of the ‘hybrid’ and ‘new generation’ operation of the 21st century. Thus, it will be described in more detail to provide a real-life case study of the full course of such operation.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia considers Ukraine (and Belarus) its neutral buffer zone with Europe, as well as a guarantee of its regional integrity. Thus, the Kremlin regards keeping Ukraine to be a friendly and subordinate partner as a paramount objective for Russian national security. Subsequently, Moscow considers any involvement by the US or the EU in Ukrainian internal affairs to be a direct confrontation to its own regional interests. Therefore, it perceived any cooperation between Ukraine and the EU or NATO prior to the 2014 as attempts to attract Ukraine further into the Western sphere of influence and to destabilise the pro-Kremlin Yanukovich government.

Ukraine itself has always been largely divided between a pro-Russian population, and a more pro-Western one, culminating in a number of protests over the course of the last fifteen years. The Euromaidan protests in 2014 eventually led to the fall of the pro-Kremlin government and the election of a pro-Western one. This event consequently triggered the annexation of Crimea by Russia, which was to a significant extent driven by a fear of losing its priceless ally to the West. Indeed, the less than subtle subtext of the annexation was to be perceived as a warning message to both - other post-soviet republics perhaps wanting to be closer integrated within the Western sphere of influence, but also to the West represented primarily by the EU and NATO not to meddle with the Russian sphere of interest.¹⁶

As already mentioned, the ‘hybrid’ conflict being an undeclared one, it is difficult to pin down its exact beginning, nevertheless, there is a general agreement that the hybrid operation started some time after the president Yanukovich fled the country in February 2014 and the pro-Western government assumed power. Consequently, on 16 March, Crimea held the referendum for independence and 96, 77% voted for a reunification with Russia - an act which can be considered as the end of the ‘hybrid’ operation (the conflict itself, remains frozen). In this approximately 4 weeks period - without much of a resistance - all of Ukrainian 190 bases on Crimea hosting 16 000 soldiers had surrounded. Russia deployed less than 10 000 assault troops - mostly naval infantry already stationed in Russian military bases in Crimea backed by a few battalions of airborne troops and Spetznas commandos.¹⁷ The Russian army managed to break the morale of Ukrainian troops creating information chaos, using electronic and cyber warfare, intimidation, bribery, psychological warfare and internet and media propaganda to undermine resistance of Ukrainian soldiers, thus avoiding the use of firepower.

Hybrid Operations in Practice

The non-militaristic non-state actors played a crucial role during the entire operation. Especially the Crimean ethnic Russian minority (1,5 million making up 65% of all inhabitants in the peninsula) played an important part in legitimising the occupation. This was done through the Russian consulate in Crimea, which started issuing Russian passports for the Crimean ethnic Russians weeks prior to the military outbreak in February.¹⁸ By this, they effectively created a large Russian minority. The Kremlin could then later on effectively rescue

¹⁶ Sergey Radchenko, “Russia and the West: Mistakes of the 1990s.” *Riddle Russia*. December 12, 2020. <https://www.ridl.io/en/russia-and-the-west-mistakes-of-the-1990s/>.

¹⁷ Bērziņš, “Russia’s New Generation Warfare,” 3.

¹⁸ Bērziņš, “Russia’s New Generation Warfare,” 7.

these people from a Ukrainian government which it felt would jeopardise the security of not only Russians in Ukraine, but also of Ukraine itself. The next few days saw a number of pro-Moscow and anti-Kiev protests in Crimea, likely to have been orchestrated, by pro-Kremlin proxies as well Russian agents to further spur the anti-Ukrainian sentiment.¹⁹ As a result of all of these unrests and violent events, Russia argued that it had a moral and, according to Russian law, legal mission to protect Russian minority in Crimea. This unrest was followed by numerous non-kinetic attacks in the form of information campaigns and cyber attacks on critical infrastructure creating informational chaos and cutting down communication between Crimea and the rest of the Ukraine.

As Gerasimov suggests, kinetic forces (both military and non-military) were employed in the later stage of the conflict. During the seizure of the Crimean capital city Simferopol - taking place on the 27th February - first the parliament was taken and the local government replaced with a pro-Kremlin one, followed by other local institutions. This political coup was orchestrated partially by the local proxies and paramilitary forces, partially by the military non-state actors (the Wagner mercenaries) and partially by the Russian special forces (the little green men).

Consequently, 190 military bases were attacked on 7th March mostly by Russian troops already based on the peninsula as a part of a self-declared peacekeeping operation. Creating information chaos, using strategic bribery, propaganda and psychological warfare together with cyber and electronic warfare to completely isolate the troops, the Russians managed to break down the morale of Ukrainian troops who have surrounded their bases without resistance and many of them even joined the Russian forces.²⁰

In three weeks since the seizure of Sevastopol, the Crimea was taken from the Ukraine, the Ukrainian forces were defeated or deserted, key strategic spots in Simferopol were occupied, and the local government was replaced by pro-Kremlin supporters. The local parliament held a referendum on joining the Russian Federation, recording a 97% vote in support of secession from Ukraine and incorporation into Russia. Thanks to a very successful strategic communication and information operations - two core components of 'hybrid warfare' - all of this was accompanied by the massive support of local inhabitants, and a minimal reaction from the international community, namely the EU and NATO.²¹

In conclusion, aspects of both, 'hybrid warfare' and 'new generation warfare' can be found in the annexation of Crimea. The blend of state and non-state actors, various military units and civilians, and conventional as well as irregular operations, accurately constitutes the 'hybrid warfare.' Similarly, Russian 'new generation warfare' places influence as a center of operational planning and employs many unconventional means to leverage it. These include; deception operations, psychological operations, and well-constructed internal and external communications - means which have been paramount to Russian military victory in Crimea. Nevertheless, whether or not this intervention and, by extension, its hybrid nature, constitutes an example of a new way of war - is not so clear cut.

Not so “New” Way of War

This section will look beyond the 2014 annexation of Crimea to find earlier examples of conflicts which constitute either 'hybrid warfare,' or 'new generation warfare.' By doing this the author will offer a brief insight into the history and development of both of these

¹⁹ Mark Galeotti, “Hybrid, ambiguous and non-linear? How new is Russia’s new way of war?”. *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 27. No. 2 (2016): 284. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2015.1129170>.

²⁰ Selhorst, “Russia’s Perception Warfare.”

²¹ Selhorst, “Russia’s Perception Warfare.”

methods and consequently, will add to the existing body of knowledge on why does the ‘hybrid warfare’ not constitute a new way of war.

Past Trends in ‘Hybrid Warfare’

While the operational environment where state and non-state actors conduct hybrid war today has indeed changed, the fundamental principle of utilising a combination of conventional and irregular methods to achieve political objectives is consistent with older forms of conflict. Indeed, the emphasis on non-kinetic means is itself a reaction to the evolution of the operational environment and, as such, many examples of ‘hybrid warfare’ throughout history can be found when these qualifications are made.

Major powers sponsoring irregular fighters and non-state irregular fighters, and non-state actors in the execution of broader military campaigns, have been central to Western operations in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. According to members of the US special forces, the US is executing its own hybrid war against Islamic State through a combination of traditional air power, sending advisors to train Iraqi troops, Kurdish peshmerga, and sectarian militias and training opposition forces with Syria.²² Fundamentally, the Iraq-Syria hybrid war is not one hierarchical entity against another, but rather an interconnected group of state and non-state actors pursuing somewhat overlapping goals where the “*social and political context is complex and the state is weak.*”²³

Another very important example of ‘hybrid warfare’ is the Israel-Hezbollah conflict in 2006. This conflict shaped Hoffman’s understanding of ‘hybrid warfare’ during his first attempts to define it in his early work.²⁴ In 2006, the Hezbollah groups, historically heavily supported by regional hegemon Iran, managed to resist one of the most advanced regional armies for weeks. The conflict included a mix of state and non-state actors, with both sides employing conventional as well as modern technologies to conduct information operations in cyberspace.

Past Trends in ‘New Generation Warfare’

Successful examples of ‘new generation warfare’ are those conducted primarily through information operations, whereby the centerpoint of (political) change is the local population. Employment of kinetic means is not important for the success of the operation and, if deployment of forces is inevitable, it should only be done in the final stages of the conflict. As already explained in the second chapter, the 21st century ‘new generation warfare’ is rooted in the Soviet military doctrine and therefore can to a large extent be regarded as adaptation of the Soviet-era methods implemented in the operational environment of the 21st century. Many of the methods Russia employed in Ukraine date back to the soviet era and the application of *maskirovka* or military deception used to take over state institutions, undermine civil society, and crush all opposition to the imposition of Communist rule. Such methods were for example implemented during the occupation of Czechoslovakia in August 1968.²⁵ Indeed, the ‘new generation warfare’ presents a continuation, rather than a revolution, of military strategic thinking.

²² Galeotti, “Hybrid, ambiguous and non-linear,” 283.

²³ Alex Deep. “Hybrid War: Old Concept, New Techniques.” *Small Wars Journal*. February 3, 2015. <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/hybrid-war-old-concept-new-techniques>.

²⁴ Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century*, 35-43.

²⁵ David Hamilton, “Deceptions in Soviet Military Doctrine and Operations.” *Thesis and Dissertation Collection*. 1986, 85-92. <https://calhoun.nps.edu/handle/10945/21758>.

When looking for examples of 21st century ‘new generation warfare’ the Russians look at events which they regard as Western influence operation - Colour Revolutions or the Arab Spring.

“Of course, it would be easiest to say, that events of the Arab Spring are not war, and so there are no lessons for us - military men - to learn. But maybe the opposite is true - that precisely these events are typical of warfare in the 21st century,” writes Gerasimov.²⁶

Indeed, such events are regarded as perfect examples of successful information operations on behalf of the West in order to promote its ideology and values, and in order to undermine the existing system. In ‘new generation warfare’, local populations are manipulated by Western propaganda, that of which demands the current regime step down as locals call increasingly for the implementation of western values, a rethink of their own political systems, and to join the Western sphere of influence.

It must be taken into account, that Gerasimov has written these lines knowing it will be translated and read by Russian adversaries - NATO. Therefore his thoughts must be regarded partially as Russian external propaganda and one must under no circumstances feed into Russian narrative of being a victim of Western aggression. Nevertheless, it is true that many Russians still deeply believe that Russia has been under sustained and effective information attacks by the US since the 1980s. Events such as the colourful revolutions and the emergence of multilateral organisations such as the IMF and the World Bank, are all considered instruments of irregular warfare intended to destabilise Russia.²⁷

As already explained in the second section, there is a significant discrepancy between what is perceived as ‘war’ in Russia and NATO. While the Western allies perceive use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian and other non-military measures as a legit tool of state competition, Russia considers them to be novel means of conflict. Therefore, the Kremlin does not regard itself as an aggressor but perceives the seizure of Crimea and operations in eastern Ukraine as strategic defensive campaigns to counter US ‘new generation warfare’ against Russian national interests and values.

The invisible annexation of Crimea does not resemble a conventional occupation but does indeed show similarities with the course of the colourful revolution. The beginning of the operation was orchestrated as a civic movement of Russian ethnic minorities wanting to free themselves from the newly elected oppressive Ukrainian government. Furthermore, the through-a-coup established pro Kremlin regional parliament in Simferopol formally asked Russia first for military intervention, and after the referendum to join the Russian Federation. Similarly, president Putin asked Russian Duma for permission to help Crimea prior to approving of the ‘peacekeeping’ operation.²⁸ Furthermore, the Russian’s demonstrated a great understanding and awareness of the key target audiences, helping them to predict what reactions to their own actions might be, and how to respond to these. As a result, Russian media were able to establish a parallel material reality, legitimising Russian actions in the realm of ideas.

There are statements from senior NATO Commanders calling the Crimean campaign *“the most amazing information warfare blitzkrieg we have ever seen in the history of*

²⁶ Gerasimov, “The value of science in anticipation.”

²⁷ Wither, “Making Sense,” 80.

²⁸ Bērziņš, “Russia’s New Generation Warfare,” 7.

information warfare.”²⁹ However when evaluating the military operation itself, one must take into account the extremely favourable operational environment:

- i) Russia already had military bases on the later occupied territory,
- ii) More than half of the local population was of Russian ethnic origin with a very strong pro-Russian sentiment,
- iii) There was neither cultural nor language barrier,
- iv) Majority of local population (95%) gathers their information from (Russian) state controlled media - either the television or the internet (where the users rely mainly on two major Russia social networks).

Yet despite these very favourable conditions, the consequent deployment of military forces the perception of the conflict being a merely civic movement, as was indeed the case with the colour revolution. Instead, the annexation was debunked as an orchestrated military operation by another state actor. The Crimean referendum was consequently declared as illegitimate by the United Nations issuing a resolution 68/262 on Territorial Integrity of Ukraine.³⁰ Furthermore, the annexation further damaged Russia’s reputation in the world’s eyes. Russia’s violation of international law and its ongoing activities within the territory of Ukraine have stimulated a response from NATO members of nearby countries in Central and Eastern Europe, calling for greater reassurance and deployments in the region. It has also triggered the implementation of economic sanctions on Russia.

Conclusion

This article has offered a reconceptualisation of ‘hybrid warfare’ as a method employed during the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The main argument is that the concept of ‘hybrid warfare’ itself is different from the perspectives of Russian and Western scholars.

While for the West its defining feature is a blend of state-non and non-state actors and conventional and non-conventional operations with an emphasis on employment of modern technologies, Russia’s perspective is broader and more vaguely defined. Indeed, for Russian military thinkers, it is full spectrum warfare with employment of means which, standalone, are not usually perceived as military ones. Primacy is therefore given to the non-kinetic means and the battleground is considered to be the minds of the local population.

Combining empirical examples from the past conflicts together with the relevant literature from both Russian as well as Western thinkers, this essay further offered an ultimate answer to the research question, whether annexation of Crimea demonstrates a ‘new way of war.’ Given the historical evidence of this method being employed prior to this military operations, it was established that annexation of Crimea presents a continuation rather than a revolution of military strategic thinking

Ultimately, this challenges not only the ubiquity and salience of concepts such as ‘hybrid warfare,’ but also demands a constant rethink of how such concepts are deployed - in both theory and practice - to justify military change, development, and revolution. Both scholars and practitioners would therefore do well to be wary of confusing contextual change and the passing of time, with meaningful changes in military, political, and cultural aspects of warfare, many of which stand the test of time. This is true not only in terms of the West, but also with regards to Russia, and is of paramount importance as the divide between East and West once again rears its ugly head.

²⁹ John Vandiver, “SACEUR: Allies Must Prepare for Hybrid Warfare.” *Stars and Stripes*. September 4, 2015.

³⁰ General Assembly, “Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 27 March 2014: 68/262. Territorial Integrity of Ukraine.” *United Nations*. March 27, 2014. <https://undocs.org/A/RES/68/262>.