

WAR AND ITS IMPACT ON POLITICS IN RUSSIA AFTER 1991

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A statement about war often attributed to Leon Trotsky — “you may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you” — is apocryphal, but whoever first said it understood the link between politics and war very well. The literature on war and state-building, including the work of Charles Tilly, Joel Migdal, William McNeill, S. E. Finer, Ronald Cohen, Barry Buzan, Miguel Centeno, Christopher Clapham, Mohammed Ayoob, Linda Colley, Rolf Schwarz, Kalevi Holsti, and Jeffrey Herbst among many others, underscores the variegated impact of war on politics both domestically and internationally.¹ Wars alter power balances among key political and social elites, bring to the fore certain sectors of the economy, arouse nationalist and militaristic sentiments, facilitate infringements of civil liberties and political repression, and — in the case of disastrously unsuccessful war efforts — spawn recriminations against those responsible for the wars, potentially culminating in large-scale social upheaval and the downfall of governments.

¹ Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990-1990* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1990); Charles Tilly, “War Making and State Making as Organized Crime,” in Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, eds., *Bringing the State Back In* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 169-191; Joel S. Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988); William H. McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force, and Society since A.D. 1000* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); S. E. Finer, *The Man on Horseback: The Role of the Military in Politics* (New York: Praeger, 1962); Brian D. Taylor and Roxana Botea, “Tilly Tally: War-Making and State-Making in the Contemporary Third World,” *International Studies Review*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (March 2008), pp. 27-56; Bruce D. Porter, *War and the Rise of the State: The Military Foundations of Modern Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 1994); Ronald Cohen, “Warfare and State Formation: Wars Make States and States Make Wars,” in Brian R. Ferguson, *Warfare, Culture, and Environment* (Orlando: Academic Press, 1984), pp. 329-358; Barry Buzan and George Lawson, *The Global Transformation: History, Modernity, and the Making of International Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Miguel Angel Centeno, *Blood and Debt: War and the Nation-State in Latin America* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003); Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: The Free Press, 1991); Christopher S. Clapham, *Africa and the International System: The Politics of State Survival* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Mohammed Ayoob, *The Third World Security Predicament: State Making, Regional Conflict, and the International System* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1995); Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837*, 3rd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Rolf Schwarz, *War and State Building in the Middle East* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2012); Youssef Cohen, Brian R. Brown, and A. F. K. Organski, “The Paradoxical Nature of State Making: The Violent Creation of Order,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 75, No. 4 (December 1981), pp. 901-910; Karen Barkley, *Bandits and Bureaucrats: The Ottoman Route to State Centralization* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); K. J. Holsti, *The State, War, and the State of War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and Jeffrey Herbst, “War and the State in Africa,” *International Security*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (Spring 1990), pp. 117-139.

War is a crucial topic in understanding politics and political thought in post-Soviet Russia, a country that has taken part — to one degree or another — in nine wars and several smaller conflicts since 1991. Russian forces were involved in four civil wars in other former Soviet republics in the 1992-1994 period — Georgia (South Ossetia and Abkhazia), Moldova (Transnistria), and Tajikistan — and then fought two highly destructive wars (1994-1996, 1999-2009) to keep Chechnya within the Russian Federation.² In August 2008, Russian military forces crushed the much smaller Georgian army and completed the de facto removal of South Ossetia and Abkhazia from Georgia. In late February and March 2014, Russian military forces occupied Crimea without bloodshed and facilitated the annexation of the peninsula by the Russian government. Soon thereafter Russian forces began supporting pro-Russian insurgent groups in eastern Ukraine, giving rise to a destructive civil war there — a war that continues to this day.³ Most recently, in September 2015, the Russian authorities dispatched Russian combat aircraft and troops to Syria to prop up the faltering regime of Bashar al-Assad against a variety of rebel groups.⁴ The ensuing Russian bombing campaign in Syria, aimed at supporting a Syrian Army ground offensive, marked the first time that Russian forces engaged in military operations outside the territory of the former USSR.

In addition to the wars in which Russia has taken part over the past 25 years, wars fought by other countries, especially the United States, have also had a far-reaching impact on political thought in Russia, mostly to the detriment of those who support democracy, human rights, and international law. In particular, the war undertaken by the United States and its allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) against Serbia in the spring of 1999, including a bombing campaign over Serbia that killed more than 500 civilians, sparked deep anti-NATO and anti-U.S. sentiment in Russia, marginalizing those who had

² V.I. Blishchenko and M.M. Solntseva, eds., *Krizisy i konflikty na postsovetskom prostranstve* (Moscow: Aspekt Press, 2014).

³ For a solid overview of the military conflict from the spring of 2014 through the summer of 2015, see Lawrence Freedman, "Ukraine and the Art of Exhaustion," *Survival*, Vol. 57, No. 5 (September-October 2015), pp. 77-106.

⁴ On the risks posed by Russia's intervention in Syria, see Irek Murtazin, "Siriiskaya lovushka: Rossiya ne dolzhna zastryat' na Blizhnem Vostoke," *Novaya gazeta* (Moscow), 8 October 2015, p. 1.

previously advocated close ties with the West.⁵ Similarly, the U.S.-led war in Iraq in the spring of 2003 put a decisive end to the partial rapprochement between Russia and the West that followed the September 2001 terrorist attacks against the United States.⁶ The prolonged U.S. counterinsurgency campaign in Iraq that followed the invasion, and the escalating war in Afghanistan after U.S. forces failed to prevent the Taliban from regrouping, further strained East-West ties. NATO's intervention in Libya in 2011 differed from the Kosovo and Iraq wars insofar as it was authorized by the United Nations (UN) Security Council (a move that Putin openly opposed but that President Dmitry Medvedev decided to approve), but Russian leaders quickly surmised that NATO had misled the Security Council about its true intentions and was using the campaign to overthrow the regime of Muammar Gaddafi and bring to power a government that favored the West.⁷

The U.S. government's willingness to act outside international law in 1999 and 2003 (among other occasions) has been cited by the Russian authorities as a rationalization for Russia's own repeated violations of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of neighboring states. Russian President Vladimir Putin seems to believe that the West's bad behavior (but not its good behavior) is worth emulating and that Russia should be praised for doing so. Oddly enough, Putin himself had actually warned against this phenomenon in early 2008 when he denounced Kosovo's imminent declaration of independence as "illegal, ill-conceived, and immoral" and accused NATO and the European Union (EU) of "double standards." He emphasized that he and other Russian officials did not intend to "act like fools. If someone makes an illegal and ill-conceived decision [about Kosovo], it does not mean that we should act the same way" in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.⁸ Just six months later, however, Putin decided to do exactly what he had

⁵ Vladimir Brovkin, "Discourse on NATO in Russia during the Kosovo War," *Demokratizatsiya*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Fall 1999), pp. 544-560. See also Oksana Antonenko, *Russia and the Deadlock over Kosovo*, Working Paper No. 21 (Paris: Russia/NIS Center, July 2007).

⁶ See Steven Lee Myers, *The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin* (New York: Random House, 2015), esp. pp. 203-262.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 379-400.

⁸ "Ezhgodnaya bol'shaya press-konferentsiya," 14 February 2008, full transcript on <www.kremlin.ru>. See also "Putin: Nam vseгда govoryat: Kosovo — osobyi sluchai. Vran'e eto vse," *Rossiiskaya gazeta* (Moscow), 54 February 2008, p. 1.

warned against. To be sure, even if NATO had not forcibly intervened in Serbia in 1999 and spearheaded independence for Kosovo nine years later — a step that Western governments depicted as a “unique case” that would not set a precedent for other separatist conflicts around the world — Putin might well have proceeded with independence for South Ossetia and Abkhazia in the wake of the August 2008 war. But, at a minimum, Western policy concerning Kosovo gave Putin a convenient pretext and rationalization for his actions.

Both the internal and the external wars in which Russia has been involved since 1991 have affected politics and political thought in Moscow. There is not sufficient space here to cover this phenomenon fully, so I will simply highlight a few crucial points about the Putin era. The prosecution of the second war in Chechnya by Putin (initially as prime minister and then as president) not only enabled him to consolidate immense power in Russia but also transformed the nature of Russian politics, as reflected in the curtailment of political debate and political competition, the reassertion of state control over key media outlets, the recentralization of political administrative arrangements, and the increasing personalization of executive authority.⁹ War-making over the centuries has both necessitated and resulted in a huge increase in the power of the state. The impact in Russia of the second Chechen war illustrated this dynamic very well, though I should note that the impact also was driven by the specific political circumstances in Russia under Putin.

From 2001 to 2005, Chechen fighters resorted to many large-scale terrorist attacks against Russian civilians outside the North Caucasus. One would have assumed that these incidents, particularly the numerous suicide bombings in Moscow that killed hundreds of civilians, as well as the massacre in Beslan in September 2004 that killed nearly 340 (more than half of whom were schoolchildren), would have generated a sustained public debate about the goals and nature of the war. After all, opinion polls conducted by the Levada Center revealed that by 2003 more than 80 percent of Russians feared that they or

⁹ See Mark Kramer, “Guerrilla Warfare, Counterinsurgency, and Terrorism in the North Caucasus: The Military Dimension of the Russian-Chechen Conflict,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 57, No. 2 (March 2005), pp. 209-292.

their relatives “might fall victim to terrorist attacks,” and by 2004 that figure had risen to 90 percent.¹⁰ The financial costs of the conflict, and the high death toll among Russian troops (comparable until 2005 to the number of Soviet soldiers killed each year in the 1980s in Afghanistan, a country that is forty times larger than Chechnya in land area and thirty times larger in population), would presumably have given further grounds for a vigorous public debate. Yet no meaningful public discussion about the war occurred at any point, nor was any senior official held accountable for misjudgments and blunders in prosecuting the war. Chechnya played no role in either the Russian parliamentary elections of December 2003 or the Russian presidential election of March 2004, and it was not on the political agenda afterward, apart from a brief flurry of concern and recriminations following the Beslan massacre. The war was never discussed in any depth on Russian television or in the Russian parliament (which held no hearings about the war even when terrorist attacks were at their peak), and the coverage of it on the television news was sporadic and highly tendentious.

The lack of public debate about the second Chechen war was a notable departure from the experience in Russia during the first war, which began in December 1994 and continued until August 1996. That earlier conflict was unpopular from the start and was sharply criticized on Russian television, particularly the independent NTV station. The issue came up repeatedly during the 1996 Russian presidential election campaign (albeit mainly as part of a general indictment of the government’s incompetence), and pressure mounted on President Boris Yeltsin for a political settlement.¹¹ By contrast, during the second war, the Russian public was much more ambivalent and fatalistic in its reactions. Even though opinion polls in 2003, 2004, and 2005 revealed that the vast majority of Russians believed that the war would drag on incessantly and would inspire further terrorist attacks, they did not take to the streets in

¹⁰ See, for example, Levada-Tsentr, *Chechnya posle A. Maskhadova* (Moscow: Analiticheskii tsentr Yuriya Levady, March 2005); Levada-Tsentr, *Rossiyanе o smerti Aslana Maskhadova, 18-21.03.2005* (Moscow: ATsYuL, March 2005); and Vserossiiskii tsentr izucheniya obschestvennogo mneniya (VTsIOM), *Bor’ba s terrorizmom: God posle Beslana*, Press-Vypusk No. 281 (Moscow: VTsIOM, 30 August 2005), as well as many surveys conducted in 2004 by the Levada-tsentr, VTsIOM, and Fond obschestvennogo mneniya (FOM).

¹¹ Carlotta Gall and Thomas de Waal, *Chechnya: Calamity in the Caucasus* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); Matthew Evangelista, *The Chechen Wars: Will Russia Go the Way of the Soviet Union?* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2002), pp. 11-45; and Tracey C. German, *Russia’s Chechen War* (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003), pp. 49, 61, 70-73.

protest or seek to form an organized movement that would press for an end to the fighting. Nor did they support calls for much more drastic repressive measures (e.g., mass deportations) that would “end the Chechen problem once and for all.”¹² Throughout the war, the Russian electorate seemed content to have the government continue with its protracted counterinsurgency/counterterrorist campaign regardless of the costs.

In the absence of public debate and high-level accountability, the war served as the pretext for a major recentralization of political authority in Russia, notably in September 2004 when President Putin cited the Beslan massacre as justification for his decision to eliminate direct elections for regional governors and to do away with single-member district elections for the Russian parliament.¹³ These actions were conducive to Putin’s political agenda, but they had no bearing on the underlying regional dynamic in the North Caucasus, with the spread of the conflict beyond Chechnya’s borders. Even as the war was winding down in Chechnya in 2006-2007, it was taking an ever more deadly toll in neighboring regions and wreaking havoc in both Ingushetia and Dagestan, with some repercussions elsewhere as well. The growing regionalization of the war from 2002 on meant that an end to warfare in Chechnya itself — Putin’s primary goal — did not ultimately bring greater stability to the North Caucasus as a whole. When Chechen fighters were forced to abandon their guerrilla war at home, they moved into Ingushetia and Dagestan and linked up with radical Islamic groups in those regions. The result was wider instability and convulsions in the North Caucasus even as Chechnya proper was pacified under the iron-fisted rule of Ramzan Kadyrov. The situation has been further complicated by the impact of external conflicts. In recent years, Chechen and Dagestani jihadists have traveled to Syria (and subsequently to Iraq) to fight on behalf of radical Islamic groups affiliated with al Qaeda and Islamic State. The prospective return of these battle-

¹² Prominent members of the Rodina party, notably Dmitrii Rogozin, raised the prospect of mass deportations, but did not gain any public backing for such measures. See “Beseda s Dmitriem Rogozinym,” transcript of interview on “Apel’sinskii sok,” NTV television station, 8 February 2004, 12:15 p.m. (Moscow time). See also “Zayavlenie partii ‘Rodina,’” *Moskovskie novosti* (Moscow), No. 34 (10 September 2004), p. 7

¹³ Vladimir Gelman, “Vozvraschenie Levafana? Politika retsentralizatsii v sovremennoi Rossii,” *POLIS* (Moscow), No. 2 (2006), pp. 15-32; and Paul Goode, “Russia’s Gubernatorial Elections: A Postmortem,” in Julie Newton and William Tompson, eds., *Institutions, Ideas, and Leadership in Russian Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 43-66.

hardened jihadists to the North Caucasus poses a host of potential dangers for Russian society and Putin's regime.¹⁴

The three external wars in which Russia has been involved — officially or unofficially — in the aftermath of the second war in Chechnya have also been notable for a lack of any meaningful public debate. In the case of the August 2008 war with Georgia, the near-universal consensus in support of the war was undoubtedly attributable to the rapid and decisive outcome of the fighting—a situation that in many countries is apt to generate overwhelming public approval. Much the same is true about Putin's decisive use of force in early 2014 to sever Crimea from Ukraine and incorporate it into Russia — all without any loss of life. The few individuals in Russia who condemned the move as an act of conquest and aggression, such as Boris Nemtsov, gained no traction among the Russian public on this matter apart from a few liberal intellectuals.

Nevertheless, events in Ukraine that have followed Russia's annexation of Crimea are not quite as easily explicable. Despite overwhelming evidence that the Russian government has been fueling the internal conflict in eastern Ukraine and that Russian soldiers who are operating without identifying insignia have taken part in certain large-scale operations on behalf of the pro-Russian insurgents (particularly at key moments in August 2014 and February 2015), the Levada Center's polls have consistently shown that some 80 to 90 percent of Russians do not believe that Russia has been involved in any way.¹⁵ To be sure, even if a majority of Russians *did* believe that Russia was directly or indirectly taking part in the conflict, they might well be supportive of that role. The “rally around the flag” effect is a powerful catalyst of support not only in Russia but in almost all large countries. Even so, the very fact that the vast majority of Russians do not believe that Russia has been either directly or indirectly involved in eastern Ukraine is a sign of how thoroughly Putin has circumscribed the leeway for political debate about fundamental matters of war and peace. Even such issues as the deaths and capture of Russian soldiers in Ukraine have not generated

¹⁴ See Mark Kramer, *The Return of Islamic State Fighters: The Impact on the Caucasus and Central Asia*, PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 381 (Washington, DC: Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University, August 2015).

¹⁵ Levada Tsentr, *Vospriyatie sobytii na vostoke Ukrainy i sanktsii* (Moscow: ATsYuL, 31 August 2015).

anything close to meaningful public discussion. Activists and relatives of soldiers who have tried to raise the issue are at risk of being accused of disclosing state secrets or of engaging in “extremism,” and scholars at Russian universities and research centers who have publicly criticized the war have been ostracized and fired.

A similar dynamic has been evident with Russia’s military operations in Syria. In September 2015, just days before Putin ordered the use of Russian troops in Syria, the Levada Center’s polling indicated that only a small minority of Russians were paying any attention to Syria and that an even smaller minority believed that Russian troops should intervene in Syria.¹⁶ But Putin, having sensed that Assad’s regime was on the verge of being overthrown, decided to act regardless. Without any public debate or hearings in the Russian parliament, he authorized the deployment of combat forces and the start of the bombing campaign. Immediately, public opinion shifted overwhelmingly in his favor, not least because every news broadcast on state-controlled television offered heroic depictions of Russian bombing raids. The broadcasters made no attempt to confirm the briefing materials they received and instead simply echoed the official line that “the precision with which strikes are being inflicted [by Russian combat aircraft] shows that we now have achieved a situation better than that attained by the American-led coalition.”¹⁷ Some Russian bloggers challenged and debunked this line on the Internet, but the only thing that mattered was the depiction on state-controlled television, which under Putin has become the exclusive news source for some 90 percent of Russians. All the national television broadcasts conveyed a uniformly rosy picture of the Russian bombing campaign.

The manipulation of public opinion about Russia’s involvement in Syria was also seen in the public’s misperceptions of the goals of the military campaign. Putin had made clear from the outset that his overriding goal in Syria was to “stabilize the legitimate authority” (i.e., Assad’s regime), but this was not

¹⁶ Levada Tsentr, *Voina v Sirii: Vnimanie, otsenki, IGIL* (Moscow: ATsYuL, 28 September 2015)

¹⁷ These statements, almost word for word, were featured in numerous news broadcasts on the Rossiya station and Pervyi kanal station on 11 and 12 October 2015, as I witnessed firsthand.

the impression given to the public by Russia's state-controlled television.¹⁸ Instead, the news broadcasts led people to believe that Russia was intervening primarily to combat Islamic State terrorists. The fact that the Russian Defense Ministry's own charts showed that none of the Russian combat aircraft in the initial weeks had actually flown sorties over the vast swathes of territory held by Islamic State apparently made no difference to a public that had become accustomed to embracing every word from on high about fundamental questions of war and peace. The public was not so submissive in the 1990s, but one of the defining features of the Putin era has been the elimination of structures that ensured public scrutiny of military operations, resulting in a lack of public accountability and a free hand for the authorities to act at will.

Thus, over the past 16 years, wars in which Russia has taken part and wars fought by Western countries have contributed a great deal to the increasing authoritarianism in Russia and the drastically circumscribed leeway for political thought. War in many countries has tended to impede wide-ranging public debate and to deter people from openly questioning the official line — conditions that are certainly evident in Russia. If Russia continues to fight wars in the future as often as it has up to now, authoritarian retrenchment under Putin will be further solidified and will be much more difficult for future generations to overcome.

¹⁸ "Putin v ekslyuzivnom intervi'yu: Rossiya mirolyubiva, samodostatochna i ne boitsya terroristov," Interview on the *Voskresnyi vecher* program, Rossiya television, 11 October 2015.