

WHAT UKRAINE TELLS US ABOUT THE COMING WAR

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At the end of 2021, Bernard Wicht published [*Vers l'autodéfense : le défi des guerres internes*](#) (*Towards Self-Defense: The Challenge of Internal Wars*). His reflections remain highly topical, despite the recent return—apparently—of "inter-state" conflicts. We asked him a few questions in order to better understand the new front lines.

In his review of this book, the philosopher Eric Werner [*stressed*](#) the most worrying aspect of war in the 21st century—its irruption into the internal space of societies, its transformation into a war of "all against all," without limits and without rules. As a historian and strategist, Wicht "does not content himself with describing the transformations in question, but links them to the overall evolution of our societies, showing that they are the consequence of more profound upheavals."

We are now direct witnesses of these deep-seated upheavals, on a daily basis. Since the publication of his book, events of tectonic proportions have occurred. We thought it would be useful to take stock of the spirit and modalities of self-defense at a time when "conventional" warfare between armed forces is returning.

That is why, when war broke out in Ukraine, I thought that my study had also *ipso facto* become obsolete, for the Russian attack seemed to indicate the great return of conventional war between states and that of regular armies. My working hypothesis, based on "molecular civil war" type threats, with a predominance of non-state actors, such as narco-gangs, narco-terrorists and Islamo-jihadists, seems therefore compromised. As my friend Laurent Schang said to me on the evening of February 24, "this time it's the end of war 2.0" (referring to sub-war challenges).

LS-SD: Are the Western/European nation-states still capable of *waging war*?

BW: It is apparent that apart from a few scattered battalions, NATO no longer has any effective military power; that the German army is in an advanced state of decay; that the French army (although still very operational) has only seven days' worth of ammunition in the event of a high-intensity confrontation, and it is the same with all the rest.

All this means that in Western Europe, the nation-state is no longer capable of "making war," a function that was its main regalian attribute and the driving force behind its historical construction (according to

Charles Tilly's famous formula, "*war makes the State.*" (See insert "*War as the Driving Force behind Nation-State Construction*").

Today, the nation-state is huddled over its sole penal-carcenary privilege. Moreover, the storm of media disinformation, orchestrated since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, shows that citizenship has lost all substance and that it is no longer important to inform free and responsible men and women, but to keep a populace, always on the verge of a riot or revolt, calm.

War as the Driving Force behind Nation-State Construction

*In his approach to state-building, Charles Tilly highlights two factors that contribute to the formation of the state monopoly of legitimate violence—on the one hand, **constraint** (the capacity to impose order and, above all, to mobilize the human resources necessary to wage war); and, on the other hand, **capital** (the capacity to finance and equip armies through taxes and the profits of foreign trade).*

Thus, Tilly demonstrates that it is the combination of these two factors (hence the [title of his work](#)) that determines the type of state organization in force, at a given historical moment—that is, the one capable of "making war." In our case, from the 16th century onwards, the transformations in the art of war (systematization of the use of firearms, recourse to professional soldiers, exponential growth in the number of soldiers) led to the need for the existing political units in Europe to have sufficient financial resources to be able to "afford" this new military tool.

Hence the institutionalization of **taxation**, in place of the old local feudal dues. The foundations of the modern nation-state were thus laid (a bureaucracy in charge of levying taxes, a standing army). From then on, the **constraint-capital dynamic** was set in motion—the more wars succeeded one another in Europe, the more the above-mentioned nation-state phenomenon was strengthened in the geographical areas concerned (the Netherlands, France, Spain, and later on, Prussia and Sweden). And thus we come to the famous formula: **war makes the State**.

Today, this analysis remains fully relevant for understanding the evolution of military-political units. However, the dynamics described above have changed scale—with globalization, capital is no longer located at the national level. As a consequence, states are emptied of their substance and depend on global finance for their functioning.

Nowadays, at the junction of **constraint** (mobilization of human resources) and **capital** (mobilization of financial resources), we no longer find regular armies, but two types of non-state military organizations—on the one hand, mercenarism in the form of private military companies (PMCs), and, on the other hand, armed-paramilitary-criminal groups. The former are generally financed by global capitalism, the latter by the grey economy. On the one hand, there is the combination of Wall Street and PMCs, and on the other, the combination of drug trafficking and various irregular armed groups.

LS-SD: So, your analysis remains relevant?

BW: *Vanitas vanitatis...* Yes. It is that of a nation-state emptied of its substance by *disaster capitalism*, of post-national societies subjected to an internal violence that is no longer channeled by the now obsolete state monopoly. If it were still necessary, the war in Ukraine and the decisions it has generated (in particular the sanctions of which we are the first victims) demonstrate that European states are no longer concerned with the well-being of their peoples; that their political elites are sucked in by the dynamics of global capitalism and by those who hold the control levers.

Fernand Braudel [said](#): "Capitalism only triumphs when it identifies itself with the State; when it is the State." Moreover, its regulation no longer goes through the nation-state (welfare), but [through war](#) (welfare => warfare), whether it is internal or against an enemy, designated by the media apparatus (Russia *in casu*). It is important to keep this reality in mind and to make it the starting point of any effort to understand the mechanisms of the present world—in the framework of global capitalism, *the empty-shell nation-state* is no longer the subject of war; it is only the theater (the setting, one might say), the geographical space where the confrontations take place. If we try to study it beyond the media noise, the war in Ukraine reveals this new state of affairs.

LS-SD: Yet this conflict marks the return of war between nation-states. So, isn't it contradictory to say that the nation-state is no longer the subject of war?

BW: No, and this question allows me to clarify my point. Roughly speaking, one can say that until February 24, 2022, many analysts (myself included) considered that *infra-state warfare* represented the major risk in Europe: 1) confrontations at the molecular level (suicide attacks, machete attacks, shootings); 2) taking place below the technological threshold; 3) involving armed groups, gangs and terrorist cells; 4) financed via drug trafficking and other channels of the grey economy. In other words, a representation that follows directly from Martin van Creveld's observation: "Modern armaments have become so expensive, so fast, so indiscriminate, so impressive, so cumbersome, and so powerful that they are sure to drive contemporary warfare into dead ends, i.e., into environments where they do not work. ([The Transformation of War](#), p. 52).

As I said at the beginning, the outbreak of the war in Ukraine has shattered this threat picture by making us think of *a return to conventional warfare in Europe* (battles between regular armies, tank engagements, artillery, aviation and long-range missiles, the specter of the use of tactical nuclear

weapons). However, on closer inspection, the reality of combat is not so obvious. Certainly, conventional warfare is well and truly present on the Russian side, with a disciplined, well-equipped, well-commanded army practicing joint maneuver.

On the Ukrainian side, on the other hand, the situation is much more blurred, as the regular conscript army was already in disarray before the conflict broke out, thus forcing the Zelensky government to rely on paramilitary groups, in particular the sinister Azov battalions, whose abuses against the civilian population are now well known. Nevertheless, they are the only real fighting forces on which the "failing" Ukrainian state (let's be honest and use this term) can rely to confront the Russian offensive. Let us specify that these units are not directly dependent on the Ukrainian state; they have their own mode of financing, based on trafficking and mafia racket of the local populations whom they do not hesitate to use as human shields. However, they were completely decimated in the fighting around Marioupol and the Azovstal steelworks. From that moment on, it must be considered that they ceased to exist as constituted troops.

Today, after the frightening human losses suffered by Ukrainian troops, it is mercenaries who seem to bear the brunt of the fighting—but who, above all, are taking over the predatory role previously played by the Azov battalions. These mercenaries are obviously not paid by Ukraine, which does not have the means, but by the American-NATO military-media complex. Capitalism is at work! We can therefore already say that at the moment, a weakened (*failing*) state—Ukraine in this case—is no longer able to wage war with its own national forces. It is obliged to call upon external forces that it does not control. We are thus in line with our previous observation on the incapacity of the nation-state to wage war.

Let us digress a little to note how much we find here the scenario of the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648). This war is a perfect illustration of the above-mentioned developments: the confusion between internal and inter-state warfare; the relative weakness of the states involved; and, as a result, the exponential recourse to private military contractors (mercenaries). For the record, the young European kingdoms (France and Sweden) sought to take advantage of the temporary weakness of the Holy Roman Empire to increase their territory and their influence in Europe. For the latter was entangled in an internal struggle against the Protestant princes who were challenging the imperial power.

First France, then Sweden entered the war to take advantage of this momentary fragility of the Empire. But, neither the king of France nor the king of Sweden had the means for their policy. They did not have sufficient nation-state apparatus to maintain such a war over a long period of time and over vast territories; their bureaucracy, still in its infancy, did not allow them to raise taxes in an efficient and sustainable manner, nor to recruit the necessary troops from among the population.

The Holy Roman Emperor had the same limitations. This is why all of them called upon military entrepreneurs (Wallenstein, Tilly, Saxe-Weimar in particular). In addition to their skills as *great captains*, these military entrepreneurs were also talented *businessmen* with the appropriate networks to recruit soldiers and maintain their armies. From then on, and precisely because of the implementation of this business model, this war became a "commercial affair," largely determined by the interests of these entrepreneurs and their financial backers. It was they who decided on the goals, not so much according to the politico-strategic priorities of the States, but rather according to the "commercial" interests of their respective companies (the armies of mercenaries made available to the European princes in struggle). To do this, and given the insufficiency of public funding, they relied on the first "transnational financial system"—the Bank of Amsterdam. However, no matter how clever the Batavian bankers were, the credits provided were never enough to cover all the needs, especially in terms of logistics. As a result, mercenary armies continued to "live on the land," looting and pillaging almost all of Central Europe.

The duration of the conflict can also be explained by this reason—in a Europe emerging from feudal economy and entering the so-called "first capitalism," military entrepreneurship brought really juicy profits.

In short, the Thirty Years' War offers an example of a confrontation that can be described as "pre-Clausewitzian," i.e., a confrontation in which, although initiated by states, [war quickly ceased](#) to be the continuation of politics by other means, for lack of adequate state resources. *Mutatis mutandis*, it is [a similar situation](#) that we find today in Europe with the war in Ukraine.

LS-SD: So, are we witnessing (or not) the return of conventional war in Europe?

BW: Certainly, but this statement requires some explanation, because if *there is a return to conventional warfare*, we must hasten to say that it is a conventional NG (new generation) war in which, on the Ukrainian side, the paramilitary and mercenary forces, charged with defending the country are proving

to be more dangerous for the Ukrainians than the Russian army that is attacking them.

From this point on, the following parameters seem to be emerging concerning this "new generation conventional war": 1) at the core level, a weakened (*failing*) nation-state which is no longer able to ensure its defense by means of its national armed forces; 2) which has to call upon *irregular forces*, paramilitary and mercenary; 3) these forces are "living off the country" through racketeering and predation; 4) and are massively financed and equipped by global capitalism. Moreover, it appears that Ukraine is by no means a precursor in this matter—at the beginning of the war in Syria (2011), it was the intervention of Lebanese Hezbollah irregulars that saved the weakened state of Bashar El Assad from collapse.

In the same way, the case of Azerbaijan points to a similar situation—it is thanks to the arms and mercenaries made available by Turkey, as well as to the contingents of Arab-Muslim fighters, all paid for by Azeri oil revenues, that this country manages to achieve the successes that we have seen in Nagorno-Karabakh.

But despite all their differences, Ukraine, Bashar's Syria and Azerbaijan are not strong states. This is not the case in the United States, which is the only country in the world that has a strong social cohesion and a prosperous economy that benefits all its citizens. Nor do any of these countries have a genuine national political elite on which the nation-state apparatus can rely; power is held by clans or mafia-like cliques seeking above all to monopolize wealth for their own benefit.

LS-SD: As a result, for the Ukrainians, it is "a war within a war?"

BW: Yes, and this is not surprising, if we follow the grid of Hobbes' Leviathan: in the absence of the State, it is *the war of all against all*—which, in the age of global capitalism, can last indefinitely because it represents a very lucrative business—hence the concept of "disaster capitalism."

In other words, conducted by fighters from paramilitary and mercenary units, this NG belligerence is "limitless" and itself becomes the objective; civilians supposedly defended become the main objective of the aforementioned armed groups, and the war effort is financed by global capitalism in its "disaster" declination. Such a war does not respect the distinctions of civil/military, front/back, war/crime. It is *mixed*: conventional on the battlefield, criminal in its functioning, terrorist in its acts and targeting

populations. Let me emphasize how we get to the characteristics of sub-state warfare described above.

LS-SD: From this vantage point, what further general perspective can be drawn from the Ukrainian situation?

BW: The Ukrainian case highlights the profound transformation of Europe and the Western world (in fact its disintegration) through two specific dimensions: one *macro-economic* and the other *macro-geographic*. The first reminds us of the relevance of the principle that *war is waged in the same way as wealth is produced*: the mode of economic production at a given time has a determining influence on both the type of war and the configuration of the military tool. Thus, wars between states in the 19th and 20th centuries were essentially based on a three-term equation: Nation + Industrial Revolution = mass armies. Industrial capitalism has formatted national spaces (nation-states) and increased competition between them in a paroxysmal way.

Today, the era of regular national armies financed and equipped, thanks to the progress of the Industrial Revolution, is definitively over. Capital has mutated; it has become entirely financialized and has migrated to the supranational level, leading to what is usually called *globalization*. It is at this level that wealth is now produced and the conduct of war is irrevocably modified. This means, as we have already said above in reference to the return of mercenarism, that states are no longer masters of their own defense. A regular army, even if it remains apparently financed by a state, has become *de facto* a tool at the service of global capital, as illustrated by the (almost surreal) eagerness of European governments to empty their meager arsenals, disarming their own armed forces to send weapons to Ukraine, some of which are already being sold on parallel markets. The analysis of this war reveals such a reality which was both unprecedented and unimaginable before.

As regards the macro-geographic dimension, the Ukrainian case underlines the value of the analysis delivered by David Cosandey in his monumental study published in 1997 and entitled, [*Le secret de l'Occident: du miracle passé au marasme présent*](#) (*The Secret of the West: From the Past Miracle to the Present Morass*). In his quest to understand this "past miracle," Cosandey focuses on the geographical factor as the decisive element of European dynamism. Europe being a priori only a promontory of Eurasia, it is its coastal perimeter, in the north as in the south, which is jagged, meandering and irregular, which allows for the establishment of very diverse socio-political entities, but intensively practicing

commercial exchanges among these entities first, then with the rest of the world.

It is thus because of this specificity of the European geographical space that Cosandey proposes his explanation of "the" miracle based on two neologisms of his creation: "*mereupory*" and "*thalassography*." The first term aims at explaining the scientific progress of Europe by its stable political division and its commercial dynamism. The second term specifies that the commercial dynamism as well as the diversity and the stability are favored by this very particular coastal contour, compared to the other continents. Therefore, based on this mereuporico-thalassographic articulation, Cosandey examines the contemporary evolution of our continent.

In casu, it is not a question of subjecting the theses of Cosandey to criticism, but to consider what they say to us of Europe in the framework of the war in Ukraine. Cosandey indeed thinks that the power of the armaments developed since the Second World War fundamentally questions the morphology of Europe. In other words, space is no longer sufficient to absorb military force. It is now too small to be able to form a stable geopolitical zone.

Consequently, Cosandey argues that the European geographical advantage is now obsolete because of the power of armaments: "Because of the progress of military technology, the thalassography of the European continent, however extraordinary it may be, no longer allows a system of states to establish itself there durably." This insight obviously deserves some explanation.

The reference to the progress of military technology refers mainly to the continental and intercontinental *reach* of modern weapons (ballistic missiles, aircraft carriers and long-range aircraft capable of striking any point on the continent). Faced with these capabilities of force projection over very long distances, the meteoric and thalassographic qualities of Europe become ineffective—the specificity of its coastline is no longer sufficient. The continent becomes once again a simple tongue of land, a Eurasian promontory, which can be crossed very easily, and in all directions (migratory flows seem to confirm this). Hence the impossibility, under such conditions, of maintaining a stable and dynamic chessboard of states, since these no longer have the capacity to protect themselves, and their geographical borders no longer fulfil a defense function.

Following Cosandey on this trajectory, the war in Ukraine seems to indicate that the future of Europe in terms of states can only be that of a large-scale disorder—a kind of new Middle Ages in which the *Church* is replaced by the *dollar*.

LS-SD: To conclude, let us return to the initial question. Is self-defense still relevant in such a state of chaos and disorder, of war without limits?

BW: Now more than ever—especially in a Western Europe incapable of defending itself, where the Ukrainian pattern is likely to be repeated. For, if the nation-state is no longer the subject of war, then it is the individual himself who becomes the subject of war (hence self-defense). Moreover, this individual is no longer a citizen, but a "naked man" stripped of all protection, without a city (*a-polis*) and liable to be put to death by the police as well as by the gangs or the aforementioned actors of *the conventional NG war without limits*. For this *naked man*, from now on, self-defense represents the only horizon in terms of residual freedom and security, the last means of preserving some snippets of the status of *political animal* that citizenship in arms (the hoplitic *polis*) previously conferred on him.

Let us specify that the notion of self-defense understood here goes beyond the simple technique of fighting with bare hands. It represents *the reverse side of self-defense* because it is not a legal concept protecting the citizen, but *a state of affairs*, a defensive tactic, a survival reaction. In this sense, it constitutes the ultimate barrier of the banished and the proscribed against the violence they are subjected to. For them, it is the means to rebuild themselves, to become human persons again and not only bodies (*homo sacer*) that can be violated at will.

The philosopher Elsa Dorlin [speaks in this respect](#) of the construction of a "martial ethic of the self," through practices that the disarmed individual, without citizenship, uses to protect himself physically from aggression. And, given the generalized chaos and the collapse looming on the horizon of European societies, in the wake of the war in Ukraine, it is important to insist on this reconstitutive function of self-defense. *To defend oneself is to exist*—the insurgents of the Warsaw ghetto are an emblematic example!

Let us also point out however that even in this scenario of *re-empowerment*, the margin of maneuver of *homo sacer* remains very narrow. This is why the putting into perspective of events (according to the method of long historical time), that is to say the narrative, occupies a strategic place. This allows for the definition of a space, an "alternative" reality to the narrative imposed by the military-media complex of global capitalism. The philosopher [Eric Werner](#) seeks to articulate this minority narrative with the triptych—*autonomy-crisis-proximity*—in response to that of the dominant discourse—*insecurity-crisis-resilience*. For the record, this last notion does not mean to *resist*, but "to meekly accept one's fate,

however bad it may be."

Autonomy, proximity, self-defense, understood as "defense as close as possible," will, in all likelihood, constitute the new reference points in a European world where the war in Ukraine [marks the ultimate end](#) of the Western historical cycle: "The time of revolutions is over. We are living in the time of extermination; and, by implication, the time of survival and self-defense. This is the era of pockets of autonomy."

*Having qualified the world-system by the state of insecure governance, we can begin by defining the new framework of war. It is part of the abatement of national sovereignties. The European nation-state no longer seems to be relevant to solve the security problems of its citizens. The latter, a historical legacy of the Westphalian state (1648), and theorized by Hobbes in Leviathan (1651), geographically delimited, is in decomposition... Moreover, the degradation of the nation-state model sees its military sovereignty put under the tutelage of another form of sovereignty, non-military, that is to say economic, carried by global capitalism (Olivier Enraygues, *Regards sur la guerre: L'école de la défaite—Views on the war: The School of Defeat*).*



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***Featured:** "Defenders of the Brest Fortress," by Pyotr Krivonogov; painted in 1951.*

