



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. [This interview is conducted by Laurent Schang, who runs the publishing house [Éditions Polémarque](#), in Nancy, France, and Swiss-based Slobodan Despot, who publishes the magazine [Antipresse](#).

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In the current scientific literature on post-9/11 armed conflicts in general, and on the war against the Islamic State in particular, it is customary to draw a more or less explicit line between the protagonists involved. This principle of distinction is based on the presupposition that contemporary conflicts are between two sides, one of which is good and the other bad by default. This moralization of the study of conflicts, which is original on the scale of the history of war, or more precisely on the scale of the ways in which so-called "Western" nations think about war, nevertheless poses a number of theoretical problems. This tendency is detrimental to the study of war on the one hand, and to the development of an appropriate response on the other (Olivier Entraygues, [Regards sur la guerre: L'école de la défaite](#)—Views on the war: The

School of Defeat).

Laurent Schang and Slobodan Despot (LS-SD): First, a necessary preliminary question. In a context of almost complete disinformation, on both sides, is it possible to think of deciphering the military operations in progress?

Bernard Wicht (BW): If one day we manage to arrive at the difference, the war in Ukraine will undoubtedly be taught first as the greatest maneuver of disinformation ever carried out in the history of the art of war. Let's recall in this regard that since the First Iraq War (1990-1991), disinformation has been an integral part of the strategy implemented by the United States and its Western allies.



Bernard Wicht.

On that occasion, it was the case of the incubators of the maternity hospital in Kuwait City, which was

given to the media. These incubators were allegedly disconnected by Iraqi soldiers when they invaded Kuwait, causing the death of the newborns who were in them. It was the post-conflict investigation of a team of Danish journalists that exposed the lie—the hospital in Kuwait City does not have a maternity ward and women do not go to give birth there. In addition, the young woman who denounced this apparent war crime before the UN authorities in New York turned out to be the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador in Washington, a student for several years at an American university. For Washington strategists, the aim of the maneuver was then to provoke an "emotional shock" within the international community, making it unavoidable to give a UN mandate for the military liberation of Kuwait.

Then, in 2002, before the outbreak of the Second Iraq War, the famous "proof" of the weapons of mass destruction that Saddam Hussein possessed was brandished before the same UN bodies, in the form of a small vial, by the American Secretary of State at the time, the former Chief of Staff of the American army, General Colin Powell. Again, the aim was to convince the world of the grave danger posed by Iraq to international stability. Up to now, these weapons of mass destruction have not yet been discovered.

This strategy of disinformation is currently being pursued on a global scale, mainly by the European and American media and a handful of experts close to NATO circles. This maneuver has so far succeeded in preventing any coherent analysis of the Ukraine conflict. The Ukrainians keep issuing victory communiqués, while the Russians are very discreet. In other words, in the words of the famous detective (created by Agatha Christie) Hercule Poirot, "in this case everyone is lying," forcing our man to reconstruct events according to his experience of crime, common sense and basic questions (*cui bono*, motive, opportunity and means).

In this particular war, we find ourselves in a very similar situation to Poirot, and we are forced to try to reconstruct the course of operations according to some bits of reality and using knowledge of the art of war and military history. This is why we must ask ourselves, beyond the successive narratives that the United States and NATO have sought to impose since the beginning of the conflict (victorious resistance by Ukrainian forces; then Russian war crimes; and, more recently, a vast Ukrainian counter-offensive and retreat by the Russian army), what can be said with a minimum of certainty at this stage:

- At the end of 2021, on the eve of the outbreak of war, the Ukrainian army was in a state of decay (See insert: *"Ukraine, A Failed State?"*).

- In June 2022, senior Ukrainian officials acknowledged that their troops were suffering appalling losses in the face of the firepower of the Russian army, with around 100 dead and 500 wounded per day.
- On the ground, since the end of the summer, we see a Russian army that does not seem to be in any hurry to end things, taking its time by advancing in some places and retreating in others. Although largely mechanized and with complete control of the sky, it does not launch the great decisive offensive aimed at the capitulation of the Zelensky government. On the contrary, it has allowed the Ukrainians to retake some towns and villages.

Should we therefore accept the official Western narrative of a decisive counter-offensive, thanks to the miracle weapons delivered by NATO (including the mercenaries to serve them) and the general withdrawal of Russian forces unable to react?

This version of the facts could be acceptable if we were facing the Russian army of the 1990s, the one that got bogged down in Chechnya and whose decay was then equivalent to that of the Ukrainian army on the eve of February 24, 2022. It took Vladimir Putin more than a decade to restore an effective and competent military whose qualities were seen during the intervention in Syria alongside Bashar al-Assad, starting in September 2015.

Ukraine, A Failed State?

In his 2017 study, Emmanuel Todd gave a pessimistic diagnosis of Ukraine. He considers it a nation "which has not been able to build itself in a state since its separation from Russia." He adds that the country is dangerously empty of its population: "above a certain threshold of emigration... in Ukraine, for example... flows can destabilize societies... without being able to predict much more than the appearance of sociological black holes." In this regard, he evokes "the appearance of a zone of anarchy" and recalls that the massive departure of the Ukrainian middle classes to Europe or Russia, makes it very unlikely that this country will be politically stabilized because, precisely, "the construction of a state is only the institutional crystallization of the supervision of society by its middle classes."

Since 2014 (Euro Maidan), the Ukrainian political class has disintegrated into internal quarrels between the pro-Russian and the pro-European, leaving the field open to far-right paramilitary organizations.

LS-SD: How would you explain this "game of cat and mouse" that the Russian army is engaged in?

BW: I think that this expression itself gives us the "key" needed to decipher what is happening at the present time:

- For the record, Russia's objective is not primarily Ukraine, but to stun and unbalance the EU and NATO (energy crisis=> economic crisis=> inflation, recession. *See insert: "The Legacy of Soviet Operational Thinking"*).
- On the other hand, under pressure from his Western mentors, President Zelensky withdrew his February-March peace proposals, so the war can continue until it is exhausted. This is most likely the game that the Russian cat is playing with the Ukrainian mouse. Since a negotiated solution seems impossible today, only the (demographic) exhaustion of Ukraine can guarantee Russia relative long-term "tranquility" on its southwestern border.
- This *cat-and-mouse dialectic* could explain the Russian attitude of "not wanting to end it all." Such a strategic posture is not unheard of in military history.

Let's explain this with a historical example.

The case of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) is particularly emblematic from this point of view. General Franco, commander-in-chief of the nationalist forces, was considered for a long time, certainly as a very shrewd politician, but as a poor strategist on the ground. Despite the military superiority at his disposal, he made poor operational choices, giving the Republicans the opportunity to carry out desperate counterattacks, prolonging, in this way, the war by at least two years.

Then recently, historical research revealed that these "wrong choices" were made knowingly in order to exhaust the human potential of Republicans in battles of annihilation, where the firepower of the nationalist army could reach its full potential. For example, even in September 1936, rather than seizing Madrid, then very little defended, and thus obtaining the capitulation of the Republican government and ending the war in two months, Franco opted for the capture of Toledo—a city certainly very symbolic, but whose strategic importance was limited. Franco wanted a long war to destroy the demographic pool of the Republicans and thus "cleanse" the conquered regions of populations favorable to the regime in place. He felt that he could not have the stability necessary to rebuild the country if a young and sufficiently large pro-Republican generation survived the war. He said it

explicitly in an interview: "In a civil war, it is better to systematically occupy the territory, accompanied by the necessary cleansing, than a rapid rout of the enemy armies that would leave the country infested with adversaries."

The Legacy of Soviet Operative Thought

*Thinking in terms of the "Ukraine" objective is too narrow. It is important to bear in mind that, geographically speaking, Russia is a world country (in the Braudelian sense). Neither Western Europe nor the United States are. Russian strategic thinking unfolds at a macro-spatial and macro-cultural level. It takes up the achievements of its big sister, Soviet strategic thought, which developed and conceptualized what is called the operational level of war, which no longer primarily targets tactical military objectives (troops, equipment, infrastructure, etc.), **but the adversary as a system**.*

*Operative thought does not view the enemy from a strictly military angle, unlike the classical Clausewitzian doctrine of destroying enemy armed forces in a great battle of annihilation deemed as the key to victory. Soviet and then Russian operative thinking approaches the adversary from a systemic perspective—it aims at its collapse, not in a great decisive battle, but **by actions in depth**.*

*It should be noted that this notion covers different aspects: the term **depth** does not necessarily refer to the defensive device of the adversary (fortifications, logistics centers, communication networks), but to all political, socio-economic and cultural structures as well as the infrastructures which allow the enemy country to function. Therefore, from the perspective of Russian operative thought, the objective pursued is rarely specific; it is holistic.*

*Russia is not simply seeking to bring a recalcitrant neighbor to heel, it is the "systemic enemy" that it is aiming at by showing in concrete terms that it is not only ready, but above all capable of waging war, including nuclear war. This systemic enemy is obviously the EU and NATO. Russia was able to become aware at the latest with the war in Syria (from 2011 onwards) of the meagre capacities of Western intervention which, in this case, were limited to sending a few contingents of special forces to support the Kurdish militias. It was able to get a concrete idea of the severe operational limits and the inability of the Atlantic Alliance to conduct a large-scale military operation due to a lack of manpower and logistics. After that, Vladimir Putin and his staff were able to plan their intervention in Ukraine. But Ukraine is not the main objective of the war; it is only a battlefield, i.e., **a place** where military operations take place. The Russians have other effects and targets.*

*As for the **effects**, Russia wants to demonstrate that it can declare a conventional war and bring it to an end. In the face of this show of force, it must be noted that NATO and the European Union (EU) are militarily "absent."*

LS-SD: Do you think that the Russians also want a long war? Do they really have an interest in it?

BW: *Mutatis mutandis*, this could be the calculation of the Russians in the face of the war (by proxy) that the United States and NATO are waging against them through the Ukrainians. This war will eventually end because of a lack of fighters. But we must hasten to add that, on the Russian side, everything is not simple either. The shock caused by the partial mobilization of the young generation does not bode well. Indeed, a part of the society of this great country has been tasting for more than twenty years the "delights" of the consumer society—possibility to travel abroad, a certain feeling of freedom linked to the consumerist way of life, etc. For all of them, suddenly, everything has changed. For all them, suddenly, everything has stopped and closed. The specter of war and death now haunts their daily lives—hence the question, is a war that is prolonged and begins to affect the young Russian generations themselves, still acceptable—and especially bearable?

Under these conditions, we can hypothesize that Russia and Ukraine are both at risk of a mutual collapse. A bit like the dialectic between Greece and Rome in antiquity, the antinomy between these two worlds being summarized by the famous formula— *Captive Greece took captive her savage conqueror*—expressing the fact that, militarily defeated, Greece nevertheless managed to completely Hellenize the Roman world. In this case, a militarily destroyed Ukraine would provoke, as a shock in return, a collapse of Russia because of the sacrifices required or, at least felt, by a part of the Russian people. The recent attacks perpetrated on the Russian soil could reinforce this feeling of sudden fragility?

LS-SD: What is the relevance of your study on self-defense when war is raging on our doorstep?

BW: As its title indicates, my latest little book is devoted to self-defense, which I consider to be the operational concept instead of that of "national defense," which became obsolete with the decline of the nation-state (marked in particular by the concomitant and exponential return of mercenarism).

[Weberian sociology regarding the formation of the modern state (Max Weber, Norbert Elias, Otto Hintze, Charles Tilly, to name the main ones) focuses on the construction of *the state monopoly of coercion*—also called monopoly of legitimate violence. It thus highlights the evolution of the military apparatus and its progressive control by state authorities. From the point of view of this conception of state-building, the recourse to mercenaries represents an intermediate stage between the feudal age (characterized by the absence of the state as well as by an anarchic chivalry practicing private warfare—*Faustrecht*), and the contemporary period with the advent of national armies completely controlled by the state. The current return of mercenarism, via the recourse to private military

companies, tends to signal a "return to the past," and consequently a relative de-construction of the state monopoly. On this subject, see Yves Déloye, [*Sociologie historique du politique*](#).]

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.

[It would seem that since the outbreak of the conflict, the Ukrainian authorities have issued eight calls of mobilization to make up for the heavy losses suffered. It is therefore worth asking why the younger generation is still responding to these calls when they are almost certain to die on the battlefield. The following hypothesis can be evoked: Ukrainians from the working classes did not have the possibility to flee abroad for lack of means; in a destroyed country where the economy is exsanguinated, it is not unreasonable to think that a "nice" bonus for the commitment (financed by the dollar) can represent for them a sufficient motive, because the sum thus received makes it possible to guarantee the survival of the remainder of the family. As is often the case in military history, it is the poor who pay the blood tax.]

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.

[According to the analysis of the available videos, they would be mercenaries of Latin American origin, probably recruited by the services of Erik Prince (founder of the infamous SMP Blackwater). The latter had been called, at the time of the Arab Spring, by the oil-rich monarchies of the Gulf, to provide them with military police battalions, composed of Colombian mercenaries. The latter had no qualms about firing on the crowd, whereas the Tunisian and Egyptian armies had refused to do so in their respective countries. Erik Prince has the necessary connections for this recruitment pool].

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* [I will not use the term "hybrid" because it is so overused and misunderstood]: 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.

[In such circumstances, and following the announcement that the *Bundeswehr* (German army) had only a two-day supply of ammunition, [a German commentator questioned](#) this state of affairs and its official recognition by the authorities. He went so far as to formulate the hypothesis of a "de facto surrender,"

explicitly admitted, in order to preserve Germany from destruction in the event of the war spreading westwards. According to him, by declaring itself "bankrupt" due to the liquidation of its very modest stocks of arms and ammunition in favour of Ukrainian forces, the country could avoid "becoming the next battlefield" once Ukraine is destroyed. While this may be a bit far-fetched, it does highlight the extent of Western European disarmament in the current conflict.]

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.

[Several factors argue not only for a prolongation of the war, but for its possible extension to the European region: the attitude of Russia, which is ready to continue the fighting as long as the Ukrainian government does not make a peace proposal; the possible involvement of Belarus; the clumsiness and blunders of the Poles and Lithuanians with regard to the enclave of Kaliningrad; the activism of the EU, the United Kingdom and the United States to prevent any end to the hostilities; and, last but not least, the blind eagerness of Germany to empty its arsenals and send their contents to Ukraine.]

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 Entraygues, *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.*](#)

