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Milevski, L.

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And then what? Extraordinary versus average warfare during the Russian invasion of Ukraine

Lukas Milevski 

Institute for History, Leiden University, Leiden, the Netherlands

ABSTRACT

A classic strategist's question is "so what?" This article proposes another useful question: "and then what?", emphasizing the possibility of further necessary action. This question, in combination with a reframing of common dichotomous military theoretical debates about maneuver, annihilation, and attrition, as instead extraordinary and average warfares, offers valuable insights to military theory. Extraordinary warfare is difficult to generate and to sustain, answering "and then what?" only poorly; instead, extraordinary warfare usually degenerates into average warfare. Average warfare is uninspiring but appears to answer "and then what?" more credibly. Ultimately, neither is likely to be individually sufficient in modern warfare.

Throughout all of history, probably all military theory in the world has contained a strong normative component and perhaps no theorist encapsulates this normative inclination more clearly than Sun Tzu: "[i]f a general follows my [methods for] estimation and you employ him, he will certainly be victorious and should be retained. If a general does not follow my [methods for] estimation and you employ him, he will certainly be defeated, so dismiss him."¹ The natural bias within this normative drive toward finding the winning formula, ideally for all time, is for political leaders, strategists, and military commanders to pursue extraordinary warfare, and for militaries to be capable of waging extraordinary warfare. It is a search for military panacea, historically often the quest for decisive battle, and in more recent decades the pursuit of decisive maneuver. Military historians similarly also indulge in the study of the extraordinary; it is fundamentally more interesting than the ordinary. Military analyst Christopher Lawrence laments that "[u]nfortunately, military history is often the study of exceptions."² Yet many have observed how the pursuit of extraordinary warfare has only relatively rarely succeeded in history, a warning which perhaps only adds to its allure.³

However poor its historical record appears, the extraordinary still emits a siren's call to military thinkers for perfectly understandable reasons. In political, military, and general public imagination, extraordinary warfare tends to be fast, cheap, and successful. Military theory is awash with operational dichotomies which hinge on such frequently assumed features as: annihilation (fast, cheap) versus attrition (slow, expensive); maneuver warfare (fast, cheap) versus positional warfare (slow, giving up initiative); maneuver

CONTACT Lukas Milevski  lukasmilevski@gmail.com, l.milevski@hum.leidenuniv.nl

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(fast, cheap for both sides) versus attrition (costly, if only for the defeated). The ad hoc categories of extraordinary and average warfare which frame this article overlap substantially with these dichotomies; for example, annihilation and maneuver tend to be understood as extraordinary, whereas attrition and positional warfare are certainly not. But the extraordinary/average distinction enables certain fruitful inquiries which longer standing, perhaps more emotionally charged, dichotomies do not facilitate as effectively.

A key inquiry, meaningful in the ad hoc distinction between extraordinary and average warfare, involves shifting from the strategist's question—"so what?"—to another: "and then what?" The former has the weakness of being logically answerable with rampantly unrealistic optimism, whereas the latter compels a certain degree and certain type of harder thinking. "And then what?" is superficially easy to answer in the intellectual context of the standard military dichotomies, but becomes trickier in the context of the extraordinary/average dichotomy. This trickiness is not merely for negativity's sake, but facilitates clearer thinking about military strategy, even if it may occasionally also succumb to excessive optimism. To fulfill this purpose the article takes three steps: it discusses the difficulty of strategy and the strategist's questions, which then lead into separate discussions of extraordinary and average warfares in the context of "and then what?"

Strategy and its difficulties

A key problem of strategy, as Colin Gray noted, is "that there is a radical difference in nature, in kind, between violence and political consequence" and that "this dilemma of currency conversion is central to the difficulty of strategy."⁴ Worse yet for the strategist, currency conversion is too straightforward a metaphor. It is trivial to change US dollars into British pounds or euros because they remain currency despite fluctuating exchange rates, whereas the difference in nature which Gray identified between violence and political consequence elevates the difficulty from being mere conversion into actual transmutation. Strategists are alchemists, their attempts at transforming violence into political consequence is closer to turning lead (Pb) into gold (Au) than dollars into euros. Fortunately, historically speaking, strategists have been just about more successful in their transmutation efforts than medieval alchemists. The crucial question is which form of warfare, extraordinary or average, is more useful for the alchemy of strategy.

The problem is that the quest for the extraordinary often does involve a certain abandonment of due diligence in the practice of strategy. Colin Gray often referred to the strategist's key question: "so what?" Another crucial question, similar but distinct, as important if not more, is: "and then what?" The difference between the two is critical. The "so what?" question Gray sometimes chased up with a more precise demand: "What will be the strategic effect of the sundry characters of behaviour that we choose to conduct?" This question does focus the mind, but strategic effect remains annoyingly vague: "the consequences of behavior upon an enemy. The effect can be material, psychological, or both."⁵ "So what?" reminds the strategist that the enemy exists and must be affected by one's behavior, but optimism bias can still throw anticipation of one's strategic effect awry.⁶

A large section of modern military theory has emphasized the psychological, organizational, and morale effects of maneuver warfare since the interwar period, relying on clarion statements by theorists such as Basil Liddell Hart and others: “Helplessness induces hopelessness, and history attests that loss of hope, not loss of lives, is what decides the issue of war” and “the true aim in war is the mind of the hostile rulers, not the bodies of their troops; that the balance between victory and defeat turns on mental impressions and only indirectly on physical blows.”⁷ Decades later, the US Marine Corps *Warfighting* doctrine described maneuver as stemming “from a desire to circumvent a problem and attack it from a position of advantage rather than meet it straight on. Rather than pursuing the cumulative destruction of every component in the enemy arsenal, the goal is to attack the enemy ‘system’—to incapacitate the enemy systemically. Enemy components may remain untouched but cannot function as part of a cohesive whole.”⁸ Max Boot, exulting over the military prowess demonstrated in the 2003 invasion of Iraq, exclaimed that “the U.S. military has adopted a new style of warfare that eschews the bloody sloggish matches of old. It seeks a quick victory with minimal casualties on both sides. Its hallmarks are speed, maneuver, flexibility, and surprise...This approach was put powerfully on display in the recent invasion of Iraq, and its implications for the future of American war fighting are profound.”⁹ Such formulations, which are broadly representative of the modern West’s culturally preferred sense of extraordinary warfare over the past several decades, answer Gray’s “so what?” question with flying colors and substantial optimism bias.

The alternative question, “and then what?” focuses attention elsewhere: the position—geographical, material, moral, and so on—into which the previous action or behavior placed the strategist and his forces and what they can do from this newly attained position. Thomas Schelling argued about the efficacy of latent force: “It is the *threat* of damage, or of more damage to come, that can make someone yield or comply. It is *latent* violence that can influence someone’s choice—violence that can still be withheld or inflicted, or that a victim believes can be withheld or inflicted.”¹⁰ Yet he neglected the degree to which the enemy’s understanding of the meaning of latent violence depends on details of its actual kinetic use, including issues of whether or not one’s own successful tactical and operational performances are repeatable or if the enemy still believes he has a chance of turning things around.¹¹ “And then what?” encourages consideration of future action, the further development of a line of operations, and generally how to keep attacking and defeating a recalcitrant opponent from one’s newly attained position. It also incentivizes the strategist, in trying to imagine the enemy’s perspective, to view the credibility of future moves in the context of the quality of past actions.

The question “and then what?” prompts varying tenors of answers when posed in the intellectual context of the established dichotomies as opposed to the extraordinary/average distinction. For the former, “and then what?” generally prompts easy answers of ‘more annihilation’ or ‘more maneuver’, whereas for the latter it may—should, perhaps—prompt a bit more reflection and doubt. After all, if need be, can the extraordinary be either sustained or repeatedly generated? Modern military theory is less well suited for answering the “and then what?” question if the “so what?” answer does not bear out in reality.

Carl von Clausewitz identified a key insight he had about the alchemy of strategy in a note dated July 10, 1827: “War can be of two kinds, in the sense that either the objective is to *overthrow the enemy*—to render him politically helpless or militarily impotent, thus forcing him to sign whatever peace we please; or *merely to occupy some of his frontier-districts* so that we can annex them or use them for bargaining at the peace negotiations.”¹² This applies just as much to defensive war as to offensive war, as a pure defense abandons initiative to the attacker while the defender sinks into strategic passivity, hoping only that time will somehow solve the political problem; in all other cases, to win the defender must also attack in some way.¹³

Both dynamics are at play in the on-going (at time of writing) war between Russia and Ukraine. Each country is trying to destroy and disarm the other—Russia definitively so; Ukraine to the extent required to defend itself and ideally to liberate the occupied territories. Similarly, each country is also trying to occupy frontier districts of the other—Russia for the purposes of annexation, having in 2022 already run sham referenda at gunpoint in the occupied parts of Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson provinces, and probably still harboring ambitions to conquer more; and Ukraine occupied part of Kursk oblast to use as a bargaining chip in any worthwhile peace negotiations.

Extraordinary warfare—and then what?

By definition, extraordinary is beyond the ordinary. The fundamental, inescapable problem of all extraordinary things is that they are limited compared to the full population of that thing. What those limitations are depends on the thing and its context, although most often it is a limitation of the number of exemplars. Limitations on extraordinary conduct of warfare may also be geographical, temporal, or contextual in other ways. Limitations of this sort generally reflect specific conditions which are, or can be made to be, conducive for both extraordinary action and result. Such specific conditions do not normally obtain in war; they are special. Otherwise, the extraordinary and the average would coincide, an irony which does occasionally occur in warfare. Fundamentally, extraordinary warfare generally requires special conditions to be practicable. After all, neither Russia nor Ukraine, nor likely any other country, could possibly conduct extraordinary operations both constantly and consistently across a 1200-kilometer-long frontline. This raises four key questions, each of which will be explored with reference primarily to the on-going Russian invasion of Ukraine. First, how are special conditions achieved once? Second, how are special conditions repeatedly generated? Third, how are special conditions sustained for the duration of a campaign? Fourth, how does the enemy respond to defeat in special conditions?

The quest for extraordinary warfare is that for special conditions in which to achieve extraordinary victories on the battlefield and along the chosen line(s) of operation. In the Russo-Ukrainian War, this has often required a small constellation of factors to achieve. At time of writing one may identify five periods during which extraordinary warfare occurred during the war: Russia’s initial invasion in late February and early March 2022; Ukraine’s Kherson and Kharkiv counteroffensives, both in autumn 2022; Ukraine’s invasion of Kursk in August 2024; and Ukraine’s special operation “Spider’s Web” on June 1, 2025.

Russia's initial invasion in February 2022 relied on two factors to generate special conditions: surprise and betrayal. That Russia overall surprised the Ukrainians was clear. Although individual units, such as Ukraine's 1st Tank Brigade around Chernihiv, had mostly taken up defensive positions, Ukraine's overall defense posture was inopportune. Kyiv hardly had any real defenses, reflecting a sense that any Russian attack would focus on the east of the country. Moreover, on the first night of the war, although Russia's aerial attack was disappointing by Western standards, it did achieve notable successes such as striking every known radar position in Ukraine's air defense network.¹⁴ Regarding subversion, there had been a real FSB campaign to subvert Ukrainian officials, largely through bribery. It appeared to pay few dividends in the north, but in the south this campaign did deliver tangible results, not only easing Russia's occupation of considerable swathes of territory but also leading to the surrender of Kherson to the Russians without a real fight.¹⁵

Ukraine's two successful offensive operations of autumn 2022, Kherson and Kharkiv, relied on various conditions. The Russians found fighting north of the Dnipro River tricky because their logistics relied on only four crossing points: the Antonovskiy Bridge, the nearby rail bridge, and the Kakhova dam road and rail bridges. This challenge only became greater as Russia pushed more forces across the river to try to hold Kherson, and Ukraine, fielding longer-range Western tube and rocket artillery systems such as HIMARS, increasingly interdicted those transport routes, ultimately rendering them unusable. In Kherson, Russian forces were fighting from a difficult logistical base with their back to one of Europe's biggest rivers. In Kharkiv, by contrast, the Ukrainians achieved surprise because all attention was on Kherson, including that of the Russians and, as it appeared at the time, of the Ukrainians themselves. To reinforce Kherson, the Russians had stripped much of the rest of the front, and the Kharkiv direction in particular was manned by low-quality troops and skeleton forces.

Fourth, Ukraine's invasion of Kursk in August 2024 also relied on surprise and Russian manpower low in both quality and quantity. It surprised everyone, as no one outside the operation's planners could believe that Ukraine would take the initiative to invade Russia, an unheard of event since Operation Barbarossa in June 1941.¹⁶ Russia had not expected such a move either; its available forces in the region were primarily conscript-based, whose use in actual fighting was both limited in utility and believed to be likely to be somewhat politically controversial. Ultimately evidence of this latter issue seems to be lacking in practice.

The most recent and final extraordinary act of warfare during the war thus far was Operation Spider's Web by Ukraine, its ambitious special operation to strike Russia's long-range bomber forces, the worst surprise attack against the Russian air force also since Operation Barbarossa. The complex operation—the result of a year and a half of planning—struck four airbases spaced widely across Russia's vastness and destroyed more than ten planes and damaged perhaps another ten, representing about 10–20% of Russia's active TU-95MS and Tu-22M3 bomber fleets.¹⁷ Even though the attack did not seem to have destroyed or damaged as many bombers as the Ukrainians initially claimed, it is by any standard a heavy blow to the Russian bomber force.

Five episodes of extraordinary warfare over three years is not much, suggesting that it can be difficult to generate repeatedly the special conditions required for extraordinary warfare—at least by belligerents who cannot achieve and exploit air

superiority. This is demonstrated by apparent failed attempts to generate special conditions. First is Russia's Donbas campaign of summer 2022 where it appeared that Russian forces were posturing themselves for a double envelopment of the whole Donbas, especially with massive forces deployed around Izium and pressure in the south around Velyka Novosilka. Yet the southern push achieved nothing and the advance out of Izium was slow and soon ground to a halt. The special conditions Russia sought to generate amounted to an enormous asymmetry of firepower and materiel, which proved insufficient to achieve the desired encirclement and instead resulted in just a straightforward push against the Ukrainian front in Luhansk province and the occupation of Severodonetsk and Lysychansk. Second, Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia offensive of summer 2023 was conducted under essentially no special conditions save that of being the first substantial employment of Western armor of the war; the result was a failure to break through the three-layered Russian fortifications. Third, Russia's second invasion of Kharkiv from May 2024 onward sought to rely on a combination of surprise—opening up a new front where it had been quiet—with the apparent protection of Russian territory as an effective sanctuary from deep Ukrainian fires. Fourth is Ukraine's attempt, within the larger Kursk operation, apparently to repeat its Kherson success by targeting Russian forces around Glushkovo, south of the Seym River. Much like the Kherson operation, they targeted bridges to interdict Russian logistics and at one point had also cut the final land corridor into what was otherwise a pocket. Yet the Ukrainians failed to seal the deal and the Russians soon reversed their tactical successes in that area. Ukraine could not capitalize on the limitations it had imposed on Russian forces operating south of the River Seym either to destroy these forces or to occupy all of that territory. Fifth, Operation Spider's Web relied on a novel approach method of infiltrating drones into Russia while hidden in containers and then launched in a single day's raid to maximize surprise.

Unsurprisingly, sustaining special conditions is difficult because they are so contextually contingent. Surprise is ephemeral, even if the material symptoms of being surprised take a bit longer to remedy. Nonetheless, within mere days of the Kharkiv counteroffensive's start, the Russians had begun rushing reinforcements to the Kharkiv front.¹⁸ Terrain-based special conditions only remain pertinent if the operations designed to take advantage of them are not successful. Ironically, a successful operation will through its own success, render terrain-based special conditions irrelevant because the frontline will have moved beyond them—such as on the Kherson front. Possibly the one factor which can sustain, extend, and exacerbate the effects of special conditions is air superiority. Air superiority, particularly when manifested as the ability both to spot and to strike targets on the ground, can prevent conventional forces from deploying the mass required to break through defenses and conduct major operations. As such, air superiority is actually a special condition in its own right, one which the West—somewhat justifiably—perhaps takes for granted, but it also has the effect of extending and exacerbating the effects of every other special condition as well. The Russo-Ukrainian War is a laboratory of warfare where neither side can achieve air superiority, as well as a laboratory of the difficulties of generating and sustaining special conditions and extraordinary warfare by either side under such a comparatively uncontrolled airspace. As such, no matter the faith Western countries put into their

air forces, it is a valuable frame of reference for what warfare may look like without that critical capability.

Ultimately, defeat in special conditions as described above often appears not to be particularly psychologically or politically impactful—at least, not in the ways usually anticipated by much of modern military theory. By contrast with military theoretical expectations, none of the extraordinary warfare thus far conducted in Ukraine has been decisive in the least. This is partially due to the lack of air control and its consequences, but also partially to do with modern military theory's inability to answer the "and then what?" question convincingly, at least in the context of the current war. Russia's initial invasion foundered as its forces overstretched themselves and were shot to bits. The Russians were forced to withdraw from northern Ukraine within a month. The two special conditions Russia had sought to engineer, surprise and subversion, failed in the event to provide a compelling answer to the question "and then what?". Surprise allowed Russian forces to reach the outskirts of Kyiv, but in comparatively small numbers which were dwarfed by the size of the city and the tactical challenge it posed. Subversion, had it worked as expected, might have made up for it—as it did in other places in Ukraine—but ultimately this is not what happened, even if it were a close run thing.¹⁹

Ukraine's counteroffensive in Kherson province liberated land and people, including the largest city and only regional capital to fall to the Russians, but had little further impact on Russia's ability to wage war. Once the Russians retreated across the Dnipro, the special conditions which had limited them on that front were removed. "And then what?" If the Ukrainians were to cross the river, those special conditions would afflict them instead—as seen to a certain degree in the desultory fighting across the river ever since, especially during the battle for Krynky from autumn 2023 to summer 2024.²⁰ The Dnipro is as effective a barrier to major offensive action for the Ukrainians as it was for the Russians.

The Kharkiv counteroffensive also liberated land and people and had the deeply ironic political effect of shocking the Russians out of their complacency and triggering mobilization in Russia. While it is impossible to argue counterfactually that, absent the Kharkiv counteroffensive, Russia would not have called a mobilization, the actual course of events suggests that Russia's defeat in that counteroffensive actively compelled Russia to expand its army. On the ground, moreover, the Russians eventually recovered, even if they had to fall behind the Zherebets River in the process. Observers had indulged in heady optimism of the counteroffensive and what it augured for the future. "If Russian morale continues to decline, and if Ukrainian forces continue to show the same level of skill and professionalism, then what follow may be a series of actions in which more territory is swiftly retaken and there are significant victories but little actual fighting."²¹ Such visions of swift future success were not borne out because extraordinary warfare could not be sustained. Optimistic forecasts of "and then what?" were not borne out in reality; instead came a different tactical and operational pattern.

Similarly in Kursk since August 2024, the Ukrainian invasion has apparently not substantially affected Russian politics or strategy. It did not slow down Russian offensives in Ukraine itself but actually may ironically have helped enable a sustained period of the fastest Russian advances since the initial invasion because the more elite Ukrainian formations which would have conducted the local counterattacks to restore

the lines into which Russian forces had broken were mostly occupied fighting in Kursk—and so allowed cumulative, if still slow, Russian advances.²² Kursk also had another ironic effect, similar to the Kharkiv counteroffensive of 2022, of forcing the Russians to generate more forces, which this time they did not do with a mobilization as in the first year of the war, but by procuring the services of substantial North Korean formations.

Finally, Ukraine's Operation Spider's Web took advantage of a blind spot not merely in Russian but indeed in *global* security imagination, instrumentalizing global supply chains to infiltrate a drone armada deep into Russia to strike four widely scattered airbases. Although the long-term effects of the strike on the Russian bomber force's ability to sustain future operations are yet to be revealed (at time of article revision in early June 2025), Russia has already sought to prevent such an embarrassment from occurring again by checking every single truck carrying a container.²³ Unlike many of the other special conditions, this one may be more repeatable. Such intense Russian scrutiny of its commercial logistics cannot last forever without substantial and perhaps unaffordable disruption. This suggests in principle that a similar operation can be conducted, but it would require a likely equal amount of planning. It is also unclear what the full Russian response to the attack will be, although the ensuing week was filled by massive Russian drone and missile strikes against Ukraine.

Defeat in such special conditions, as the result of extraordinary warfare, can always be excused by the defeated. Each particular constellation of conditions was special—it was not a fair fight, it will not happen again, at least not in that way. That needling question, “and then what?” has up until now (at time of writing) always been broadly answered by—nothing extraordinary. The special conditions dissipated and average warfare became the norm again, every time. Yet if extraordinary warfare always turns into average warfare, then the latter must also be understood because, crucially, extraordinary warfare exists only in relation to average warfare—and not all extraordinary warfare is equally exceptional. To use statistical terminology imprecisely to make the point, one may say that the Kherson counteroffensive was less than one standard deviation above average, whereas the coincident Kharkiv counteroffensive was two or more standard deviations above average. This is simply to say that both the fighting and the maneuvering in the latter, especially in the early days, was disproportionately both easier and more effective than in the former.

Recontextualized within Clausewitz's two objectives in war—destroying the enemy army and conquering territory—successful extraordinary warfare excels at two things. First, it accelerates attrition of the opposing army, but does not replace it. Indeed, analysts such as Franz-Stefan Gady and Michael Kofman have suggested that attrition is more likely the key to unlock maneuver.²⁴ That is, the effects of attrition may enable the creation of special conditions through the achievement of a lopsided force ratio which could facilitate maneuver and extraordinary warfare. Second, extraordinary warfare excels at conquering territory. This means that it is ideal for Clausewitz's second purpose of war, on which the Ukrainians relied in August 2024 in Kursk. Of the two things at which extraordinary warfare excels, neither on its own is necessarily sufficient to compel the enemy to make peace and, in the on-going war, no episode of extraordinary warfare has successfully coerced the enemy in this way. Each case of

extraordinary warfare has always led to consideration of the dreaded question: and then what? And then—average warfare.

Average warfare—and then what?

Average warfare is that which is comprised of the myriad data points of combat which do not notably deviate from each other, such as the vast majority of the scores if not hundreds of daily combat engagements occurring in Ukraine, often between sub-tactical units which are not even a single squad in size. These combats are generally not conducted in conditions which are operationally distinctive, even if one side or the other manages to eke out limited, tactically-special battlefield conditions. Average also includes the normal business of armies even in wartime—waiting, even if only for the enemy's attack. It is not attractive warfare, whether for practitioners, analysts, or scholars. Yet it is prevalent. One cannot describe most of the warfare along most of the frontline between Russia and Ukraine over most of the war as anything other than average—at a generally low standard.

Crucially, average warfare is not a fixed quantity or quality but is determined by the relative daily performances of all involved belligerents over the course of the war. Average is malleable. Historical campaigns exist in which average and extraordinary were synonymous, such as the German invasion of France in 1940, the four days of land operations to end the Gulf War in 1991, and the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Not coincidentally, all three were fought under the auspices of air superiority if not air supremacy. Yet even in these cases, the answers to “and then what?” are instructive. France surrendered after the reshuffled French high command betrayed and stabbed the Third Republic in the back. The Gulf War was ended unilaterally and arbitrarily by the United States, as much in a bid to avoid the natural logic of “and then what?” as anything else. The 2003 invasion toppled Saddam Hussein's regime but the botched transition afterward instigated insurgency.

The average warfare characterizing Russia's invasion of Ukraine has varied according to time and place; the Ukrainian average broadly eked out advantage against the Russian at times in 2022 but the scales shifted in 2023 and 2024. Russia's average has been characterized by the Donbas offensive of summer 2022, the Popasna-Bakhmut and Avdiivka-Pokrovsk offensives in autumn 2022-summer 2023 and autumn 2023-winter 2025 (time of writing), respectively, and its operation to try to push the Ukrainians out of Kursk from August 2024 until March 2025. These offensives have been characterized by slow, grinding advances, variable but diminishing levels of Russian fire-power superiority, apparently high Russian casualties, and territorial conquests which can only be considered small in comparison to the expenditure of men and materiel. Yet the successes of average warfare are rarely measured accurately in territory changing hands, which is just a symptom of its real effect, which is the relatively invisible scars left on engaged units—the human and materiel losses which damage the army's ability actually to fight.

Extended high intensity average warfare may primitivize armies, i.e. wear down military organizations so that formal structural and informal social connections fray and critical professional expertise dwindles or is altogether lost, and attrite military equipment which can only be replaced by inferior counterparts, if at all.²⁵ There are

indications that the Russian army is certainly becoming primitivized as a result of the constant attrition of its average warfare in Ukraine. In early 2025, much has been made of the purportedly increasing Russian tendency to deploy the walking (and sometimes not even walking) wounded in assaults.²⁶ There is also video evidence that at least individual Russian units are defaulting to using donkeys for the final stages of the supply chain due to alleged shortages of vehicles at the front and the Ukrainian UAV menace.²⁷ Yet at the same time, Russia's success in bypassing sanctions may in the long-term yet enable its defense industry to transform the Russian army into one more technologically advanced and effective than that with which it invaded Ukraine in 2022.²⁸

There is much not to like about such average warfare, especially as low quality an average as seen in the Russo-Ukrainian War. Yet there is one feature which apparently recommends it over extraordinary warfare. It is conditions-agnostic by definition, being the average of warfare in sun and snow; in forests, fields, and urban; and so on. Because of this agnosticism, it is inherently scalable; extraordinary warfare is difficult to replicate, at least without air power, but average warfare is replicable at any scale by default. Because of this agnosticism, it also *appears* indefinitely sustainable. Appearances may be deceiving, as Russians formations are suffering invisible damage just as the Ukrainians are, although unlike the Ukrainians the Russians are able regularly to rotate units off the frontline to be reconstituted. Yet the point is that average warfare, inherently attritional warfare, *can reliably* produce an apparently credible answer to the question “and then what?”—more average, more attrition, in the hopes of perhaps even creating blood-soaked special conditions for an extraordinary operation. It is not a pretty answer. It is not an answer which promises a quick or easy victory. It is not an answer which modern military theory would ever favor, particularly in the West. But it *is* an answer, an apparently credible answer, and one which seemed still to be just about working for Russia but not necessarily for Ukraine by early 2025. For most of the war, Russia gained more from average warfare than did Ukraine because Russia could better endure and better sustain the attritional character of average warfare.

Yet this may be changing. The real costs of such average warfare are often invisible, damage to formations, rather than necessarily ground gained or lost; and advantage measured purely in what is readily apparent—gaining ground—may yet reflect plausible, less visible disadvantages. By late February 2025, despite the political controversies surrounding Donald Trump's misguided peace efforts, the Ukrainian STAVKA presented optimism that Russia cannot sustain its average warfare much longer, forecasting that Russia's defense industrial production and armed forces recruitment will both contract in 2025.²⁹ The effectiveness of past Russian average was also buoyed by their mass use of glide bombs, but this advantage is being increasingly minimized by Ukrainian electronic warfare, resulting in even higher Russian losses but even lower forward momentum.³⁰ Even if Russia still has a dwindling advantage in average warfare, in the dual context of its political goals against Ukraine and the resources it has available either domestically or from allies such as North Korea, it seems likely to find sustaining that average warfare increasingly difficult, never mind all the way to victory as the Kremlin prefers to imagine it. The wages of war hinge on which army succumbs sooner to its invisible wounds.

Despite such optimism about the future of Russian average warfare in Ukraine, average warfare has rarely been particularly kind to Ukrainians. Every successful case of extraordinary Ukrainian warfare, each and every exceptional offensive, has fizzled into a return to average warfare. In Kherson, skirmishes continue to occur on and along the Dnipro River and Russian UAVs deliberately hunt civilians in contradiction to all the laws of war. Here the average is somewhat special in its own right due to the dominating effects of the river on operations. In Kharkiv, by mid-October 2022, the frontline had stabilized somewhat east of the Zherebets River, and besides some early Ukrainian attempts to push on Kreminna, the Russians have regained the initiative, slowly pushing the Ukrainians back over subsequent years—splitting the bridgehead over the Oskil River into two and crossing the Oskil north of Kupiansk to create a bridgehead which the Ukrainians have not been able to liquidate (at the time of writing).

Similarly in Kursk, the extraordinary first week of the Ukrainian incursion gave way to average defensive warfare as they defended the perimeter of the occupied territory. The Russians failed to erase the incursion by the repeated deadlines Putin has set for the achievement of this task, resulting in pushing the invading forces out only in March 2025 after more than half a year of grinding average warfare, including leveraging a large North Korean contribution and taking advantage of President Donald Trump's temporary cessation of intelligence sharing with Ukraine. The Ukrainian pursuit of special conditions and extraordinary warfare is a direct reflection of its apparent disadvantage in average warfare. This pattern is seen again in Operation Spider's Web, when Ukraine sought to alter the average of Russia's long-range strike capability by damaging as many long-range heavy bombers as it could. The jury is still out on its long-term effectiveness, but in the short-term it has not disrupted Russia's ability to strike Ukraine with massed drones and missiles.

To return to Clausewitz's two objectives in war—destroying the enemy army and conquering territory—average is distinct from extraordinary. First, average is more reliable at destruction and attrition, but on longer timescales and with the implication of higher casualties of one's own, both of which make it an unwelcome consideration in Western military theory. Yet because such casualties lost or inflicted become a matter of statistics rather than psychologically jarring events, average warfare has difficulty being politically decisive. A prolonged period of average warfare still needs an exclamation mark to make some sort of political impact, like the Hundred Days Offensive in 1918 which became a decisive defeat of the German army that resounded politically. Second, extraordinary always turns into average eventually, unless the enemy surrenders first. This matters because the conquest of territory through extraordinary warfare must then be defended through average warfare. The conquest of frontier territories has to be defended until the enemy comes to negotiate; this is as true of the Russians concerning Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporzhzhia, and Kherson as it was for the Ukrainians in Kursk. Defeat in conquered territories diminishes the credibility that occupation will endure.

Conclusion—and then what?

“And then what?” is a much trickier question for strategists to answer than the delusion-susceptible “so what?”. It forces strategists to consider further action if their preferred outcomes are not forthcoming, although it too can sometimes be taken in

by illusion, as the excessive optimism after the Kharkiv counteroffensive of September 2022 demonstrated. Due to its reliance on special conditions, particularly in absence of compelling air superiority, extraordinary warfare has difficulty answering “and then what?” because special conditions are difficult to generate and sustain, and because they can act to lessen the psychological and political impact of defeat. Due to its limitations, extraordinary warfare usually transforms into average warfare. The latter can more reliably answer “and then what?,” but it too has its limitations concerning both sustainability and political impact. No matter whether warfare is extraordinary or average, strategy’s alchemical challenge remains.

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Notes on contributor

Lukas Milevski is an assistant professor (tenured) at the Institute for History at Leiden University, where he teaches strategic studies to BA and MA students. He has published two books with Oxford University Press: *The Evolution of Modern Grand Strategic Thought* (2016) and *The West's East: Contemporary Baltic Defense in Strategic Perspective* (2018) and publishes widely on strategy in academic and professional journals. He is currently working on a book manuscript on how to study strategy.

ORCID

Lukas Milevski  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2928-0662>