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OFER FRIEDMAN

Russian 'Hybrid Warfare': Resurgence and Politicisation

Oxford University Press, New York 2018, 288 pages

Keywords: hybrid war, conceptualization, Russia, the US

Abstract: *The book review is dedicated to a work that tackles one of the trendiest concepts of recent times. The book concentrates on the conceptualization of the notion of hybrid war and its perception on both sides of the Atlantic. The declared goal of the book was to investigate how political forces have shaped conceptual thinking between the West and Russia and explain the reasons for mutual criminations. Combining quantitative and qualitative methods the author examined large amounts of literature and took an exploratory approach to dig into categorical data from both American and Russian thinkers' works then compared the conceptual usage of them.*

During the past decade there has been widespread speculation around the term "hybrid war". Both academic circles and mass media have pushed hard to spark interest in this concept, often introducing vague explanations of how to interpret the term. The word "war" is enough to draw unjustified attention to and "hybrid" spices it up with an exotic flavour provoking the reader to continue to the next page. Dr. Ofer Fridman who is a lecturer in war studies and director of operations at the King's Centre for Strategic Communications (London), has taken up a challenge in his new book to bridge

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the gap between Russian and Western connotations of the concept of ‘hybrid war’ without trying to reconcile or justify them. Dr. Fridman prior to embarking on an academic career served 15 years in the Israeli Defence Forces¹ and his main areas of expertise focus on the intersection between strategy, military thinking and contemporary conflicts, including information confrontations, the role of civilian casualties and military transformations. One of the countries that dr. Fridman has broadly covered in his research is Russia and its political and military ideologies. Some of his articles dedicated to Russia’s policy and different types of warfare are “*Hybrid Warfare and Gybridnaya Voyna – Similar but Different*”² and ‘*Russian Perspective on Information Warfare: The Conceptual Roots of the Politicisation of “Information Warfare” in the Russian Academic, Political and Public Discourses*’³. In these articles the author has tried to manifest an unbiased approach towards Russia and explain the vast usage of such terms as hybrid wars and information war from the Russian perspective, yet so far his paramount work on conceptualization of these terms is the book that I have chosen to write a review about as the author offers a clear image of the conceptual debates in both sides of the Atlantic as well as discusses Russian approach to these issues. This book is his first major attempt to present his in–depth analysis of the Russian military thought and strategy to the western reader. What is significant, the work of dr. Fridman has gained approval not only in the Western circles of political thought but also in Russia. The American magazine “*Foreign Affairs*” placed the book in the list of the best readings of the year 2019 while dr. Fridman had been invited to give lectures at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations.

In less than three hundred pages the author is explaining why the hybrid war and *gybridnaya voyna* (the Russian translation of the term) are not the same and why the word “war” should not be overused. The book is not about the means and tools of the so–called hybrid war, nor is the author striving to explain any operations that have been conducted by the Russian government or the West to manage the Ukrainian or Syrian crises. The author’s main concern lies in the politicisation of the concept of war as he recognises the danger that comes with the conviction that the West and Russia are in some type of war, therefore he mentions: ‘Once we convince ourselves that we’re in war, we might go to actual war. We might not be in peace with Russia, but the situation should not be described as any type of war, whether hybrid or any other

¹ KCL, King’s People, <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/people/dr-ofer-fridman> (June 25, 2020)

² O. Fridman, *Hybrid Warfare and Gybridnaya Voyna – Similar but Different*, «The RUSI Journal» 2017, Issue 1, vol. 162.

³ O. Fridman, *Russian Perspective on Information Warfare: The Conceptual Roots of the Politicisation of Information Warfare in the Russian Academic, Political and Public Discourses*, «Defence Strategic Communication» 2017, Issue 2.

kind as it has serious consequences'⁴. Instead, he explicitly focuses on how the conceptualisation of warfare in Russia and the West has shaped contemporary political events⁵. The book consists of three main parts; in the first part the author described how the American military thought had been developed, whose ideas influenced its development and the tools that the US considered a part of hybrid war, second part focused on the Russian political and military intellectuals who influenced Russia's policy making in the 21st century and in the third part of the book the author brought both narratives together and showed how they engaged with each other, hence the book is rather about how the Western and Russian conceptualisations of war have been politicised to shape the contemporary relations between the two⁶.

The declared goal of the book was to investigate how political forces have shaped conceptual thinking between the West and Russia and explain the reasons for mutual crinations. To help him achieve this goal the author prepared several research questions that he mentioned in the introductory part. Combining quantitative and qualitative methods he examined large amounts of literature and took an exploratory approach to dig into categorical data from both American and Russian thinkers' works then compared the conceptual usage of them by the modern policy-making circles of both countries. The author also mentioned the interpretation nuances when introducing Russian thinkers' works and terms as he recognised that sometimes the misunderstanding of the terms arose because the term in Russian, even if accurately interpreted into English, would have a different connotation thus could be evaluated differently. From the first pages of the book it becomes obvious that the author has a sceptical attitude towards the term hybrid war, therefore it does not come unexpected that he adopted the relativistic approach in his research, giving no credit to finding the truth about the concept of hybrid war. His research rather focused on the exploration of the perception of the concept and the reasons that led to it. The author is convinced that the truth is created by the meanings that people attribute to concepts. Hence to explore the relationship between the reality and concepts he started by examining the works of F. Hoffman, who first conceptualised hybrid warfare in the US, trying to focus on the theoretical debate within the US military that led Hoffman to develop his theory. In order to give a complete overview of the original concept, the author studied the context of the US military culture and put the reader into the picture of the US military discourse. The next step was examining the Russian perception of the concept of hybrid war, the theories that preceded the concept and served as the conceptual basis for its creation. When assess-

⁴ War Studies KCL, *Playlists* [Youtube channel]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=stUfagEOHH4> (25.06 2020)

⁵ O. Fridman, *Russian 'Hybrid Warfare': Resurgence and Politicisation*, New York, 2018, p. 6.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

ing the Russian military and political discourse, the author used the works of the most influential thinkers that shaped today's Russia's political vector. To my mind, Fridman's biggest contribution and novelty of his work is the systematic analysis that he conducted to find and logically arrange the sources of the Russian political thought that shaped or impacted the vague idea of "hybridity" starting from the writings of the émigré army officer E.E. Messner (1891–1974), who developed the concept of *miatezhevoina* (translated by Fridman as "subversion-war") up to the post-Soviet polemicists (after 1991). Fridman covered the writings of post-Soviet Russian ultra-nationalists, in particular A.G. Dugin and I.N. Panarin, who took up some of Messner's themes. In addition the author revealed how the West picked up the Russian version of hybrid war (or *gibrinaya voyna*) even though in Russian official doctrinal statements it has never been used.

What is remarkable about this study is that the author created a simple logical thread of his thought that was easy to follow and was never too involved in any of the discourses nor did not he try to find the "right" and "wrong" answers, so his analysis appears to be relatively unbiased. When it comes to perks, it goes without saying that there is no shortage of them in this work; accurate analysis of well-researched sources, succinct, and jargon-free language can be named among others, yet it cannot go unnoticed that the work is meant for the academic audience or those who are professionally engaged in political or military affairs as the overall high-profile language would make the reading somewhat difficult for the general public unfamiliar with the political history. The reading of this book might also require some background in history or political science which is also a major hindrance for the general public. Ironically, it is usually the general public that is targeted by the mass media and politicians and even though this book could potentially be an eye-opener for many, it will, however, be reserved for the few and that is its main drawback in my opinion.

To conclude the review, I would like to recommend this book to those interested in international affairs, policy-making and political science, it can also be useful for students studying international affairs as it will give an unbiased insight into a highly discussed nowadays topic and might help understand some of the processes happening in this entangled world.

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