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## Strategy and operations in a war of exhaustion

**Summary.** This article assesses the strategy and war in Ukraine in the light of the Soviet strategic debates of 100 years ago. The goal is to question the viability of the strategic goal of overthrowing another state with the help of military force. This will be done within the classic debate about strategies of destruction and attrition from the 1880s to the 1920s. This debate will also help explain the fundamental changes in the nature of warfare after Russia's renewed attempts to topple Ukraine through a full-scale invasion in the winter of 2022.

**Keywords:** destruction; exhaustion; changing character of war; adaptation; attrition.

**Introduction.** In 1980, Jiri Valenta wrote an article in *International Security* comparing the decision-making process leading up to the Soviet invasions of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Afghanistan 1979. He began with comparing the stated reasons for invasion:

The arguments advanced in both cases were rather confused and contradictory, ranging from a claim that the USSR responded to a call to “assist healthy forces” to claims that military action was needed to put down an imminent “counterrevolution” and prevent the countries’ potential defection to the imperialist camp. In Czechoslovakia, this threat was supposedly posed by the imperialist bloc, primarily the CIA in the United States, neighbouring West German “revanchists,” and “Zionists” [1].

The only thing missing in the Soviet statements from 1968 and 1979 is Putin’s continuous references to perceived Ukrainian “nazis”. These analogies were seized upon by many commentators at the time of the Russian full-scale invasion beginning on 24 February 2022. This brief example underlines the continuity of ambitions and perceptions that still appears to guide Russia’s foreign relations. Is there also a similar continuity to the use of strategies of destruction to reach these objectives? And is this Soviet and Russian modus of use of force supported by military theory?

This article will initially briefly describe and the strategic debate over strategies of destruction and exhaustion and how these led to the emergence of modern strategy and operational art. The tension between this dual strategy model will then serve as a framework for an analysis of the changing character of the Russo-Ukrainian war, with an emphasis on the period from Russia’s invasion 24 February 2022.

**Historical and theoretical sources.** The main theoretical source is Soviet General Alexandr A. Svechin’s book *Strategy* from 1927. Svechin based his historical method and interpretations of modern strategy on the German

military historian Hans Delbrück’s writings. Delbrück initiated what is known as the German strategic strife (*Strategiestreit*) between himself and the historical department of the German Great General Staff (*Große Generalstab*). The heated debate was initially whether the Prussian King Frederich the Great had used a strategy of destruction or exhaustion during the Seven Years War, 1756–1763. It was also a debate about history as science and the abuse of history to legitimise doctrine [2].

The two types or directions of strategy in this debate needs to be clarified. In German, the terms were *Ermattungsstrategie*; strategy of exhaustion and *Vernichtungsstrategie*; strategy of annihilation or destruction. Annihilation and destruction are used synonymously in English, meaning the same thing. Exhaustion is often confused with attrition, which is a more tactical term relating to physically wearing down an enemy’s combat power by inflicting casualties and losses of materiel. In a strategy of exhaustion, the enemy’s entire capacity to wage war is to be exhausted to a point it no longer is capable of resisting. That may include undermining of the economy, food production, war industry, popular will to resistance, military logistics, attrition of the armed forces, etc.

The German Great General Staff used the authority of Frederic the Great to legitimate their chosen doctrine of a strategic offensive to knock out an opponent by a crushing blow before he could mobilise. This short war strategy was necessary for Prussia and later imperial Germany to avoid a drawn out two-front war Germany did not have the resources to pursue. Prior to the First World War, Germany developed the Schlieffen Plan, where France should be defeated first by one massive operation through Belgium, and then the entire army would move east to fight Russia, which was expected to use more time to mobilise. War was regarded as inevitable, so a high-risk

strategy of destruction was accepted as necessary and also became the precondition for policy [3].

After the First World War and the Russian Civil War, Alexandr A. Svechin initiated a similar strategy debate in the Soviet Union's Red Army. He stated his arguments in his book *Strategy*, published in 1926, with a slightly revised edition the year after. Before the Russian Revolution, Svechin was a general staff officer in the Imperial Russian Army and had served with distinction in The Russo-Japanese War 1904–1905 and the First World War. He was well read and also translated Clausewitz's *Vom Kriege* (On War) into Russian and wrote a short biography of Clausewitz before he was murdered in the purge in 1938. Svechin redefined strategy from its classic definitions by Clausewitz and Jomini, into the modern industrialised peoples war of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century [4].

The changing character of war is a term from the Prussian General and military theorist Carl von Clausewitz in his discussion of the nature of war. Clausewitz argument is that while the nature of war is constant, a war's character will change between wars and also as a war develops over time [5]. The ability to foresee, influence and adapt to these changes is imperative to be able to overcome the enemy and win. This issue is the subject of The Changing Character of War program at the University of Oxford that was initiated in 2003, which has maintained a continuous debate of these issues [6].

The article will describe the historical strategic debates and arguments regarding strategies of destruction and exhaustion. The key elements from the Soviet debate will be used to analyse the developments in the Russian-Ukrainian War since the Russian force buildup and full-scale invasion 24 February 2022. The emphasis is how the interactions between the physical conditions in combat and the strategic framework for operations will cause the belligerents to adapt at all levels, from the troops at the front to operational art, strategy, and policy.

#### **Strategies of destruction and exhaustion.**

The strategic debate in Imperial Germany from the 1880s and in the Soviet Union's Red Army in the 1920s, centered around strategies of destruction and exhaustion. In his book *Strategy*, Alexandr A. Svechin argues that in modern war between industrialised societies, victory by a strategy of destruction is virtually impossible, due to the resilience in states and societies, and their armed forces. Any war will most likely end up as a war of exhaustion, where the state and its allies' total civilian and military resources will at the end decide the outcome.

Russia attempted to subdue Ukraine by pursuing a strategy of destruction, including political decapitation, when they invaded 24 February 2022. When the Russian strategy failed, the character of the war changed into a war of exhaustion. Russia appeared to have ended up in a war it tried to forestall by its high-risk initial operations, since neither the Russian civil society nor its industry were initially prepared for a long war. The rapid commitment of the democratic west in support of Ukraine and Ukraine's mobilisation allowed the economic and industrial capacities of two of the World's three largest economies to back Ukraine's war effort. The challenge has been, and still is, to deliver what is needed to Ukraine and to convert those resources into maximum combat power that can be applied in the area of operations by the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

Warfare and operations are dependent on the resources available and how these resources are managed. The outcome of the war will probably depend on both the amount of resources and how well they are utilised at the strategic, operational, and tactical level. The challenge for Ukraine's western supporters is to comprehend the sheer volume of material support that is needed and to find out how to run a war time armament production in a peace time economy. The problem with understanding volume is to some degree related to more than 20 years of contributing small forces to US and NATO led counterinsurgencies "out of area", where volume never was an issue. The challenge regarding war time production is that it will probably demand a stronger involvement by the state into an optimised global "just-in-time" supply chain.

Why then, bring in an early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Soviet Red Army strategist into these specific 21<sup>st</sup> Century problems?

First of all because Svechin addressed similar problems. He understood that the changed character of war during the First World War had created the modern industrialised people's war. Both the character of the war as an exhausting war of recourses, but also the fundamental way technology and industrialised weapon production had changed during the war. The major change and precondition for modern war was that the Napoleonic ideal of rapid military victory by destruction was no longer valid. Wars of exhaustion was the new norm, caused by the forces that created the modern industrialised nation states. These states had armies that it would be very hard to destroy in one battle or operation, and their populations, economies, and

industry would make it possible to stand up new armies to make good initial losses [7].

Secondly, the assumed stalemate along the front in Ukraine may lead to the impression that because there is little movement of the front line, there is no development in the war. The narratives of “stalemate” and “failed Ukraine offensive” have been forwarded since the first mechanised thrusts got bogged down in the Russian defences in the summer of 2023. The argument assumes a traditional breakthrough of the fortified front and a subsequent exploitation of mechanised forces to reach the Sea of Azov and cut the “land bridge” between Russian occupied Donetsk and Krym. The fortifications and obstacle belts Russia have constructed along the entire front, do not allow for a traditional “manoeuvrist approach” as described in western military theory and doctrines. The issue of attrition, which has been rejected with scorn by the same doctrines, has once more forced itself to be an integrated element in warfare.

The logical approach to any offensive ambitions in positional warfare supported by strong fortifications and obstacles, is what British historian Jonathan Boff called mobile attrition in his description of the Allied offensive on the Western Front in 1918 [8]. This offensive consisted of series of small sequenced and parallel attacks that each both gained some ground and destroyed enemy forces. The attacks were known as “bite and hold” or “*attaque brusque*”, short violent attacks with a limited depth that were halted before the enemy was able to react in strength. When the enemy counterattacked, they were met by prepared fires. Commanders at the tactical and operational levels learned to coordinate these attacks in time and space, and the series of attacks over time took terrain and broke through prepared defences and destroyed enemy units in the process. After the first month, the German Army had spent all their reserves and could only react locally to the Allied combat system. The Germans had the choice of staying in their trenches and be destroyed, or retreat and give up their fortifications [9].

Studies of the First World War were to a great extent the foundation of Svechin’s revised understanding of strategy. He became a member of the Military Historical Commission set up in the Soviet state to study the First World War and led the commission until May 1921 [10]. In his Preface to the English edition of Svechin’s Strategy, Jacob W. Kipp presents Svechin’s strategic paradigm:

The core of Svechin's Strategy and its most controversial element to both his

contemporaries and present-day analysts was a dualistic strategic paradigm, which Svechin borrowed from Hans Delbrueck, the eminent German military historian and theorist. The two poles of this paradigm, attrition (Delbrueck's *Ermattungsstrategie*, or Svechin's *izmor* ("starvation") in Russian) and destruction (Delbrueck's *Niederverfungsstrategie*, or Svechin's *sokrushenie* in Russian), were conditioned by the circumstances of war itself.

There is an issue in the English translation of Svechin’s *Strategy*. The Russian term *izmor* is translated as attrition instead of exhaustion, which is the closest English term. Attrition (French *usure*, German *Zermürbung*) is more of an operational and tactical term, which is about wearing down the enemy units by destroying equipment and killing soldiers. Exhaustion, on the other hand is the strategic weakening of the enemy’s ability to wage war, not only by inflicting losses of troops and equipment, but also by weakening the economy, destruction of industry, undermining of political will, defeat of allies, etc. Strategic exhaustion will occur at all sections of society, but also of the military forces, as the accumulated results of losses, destruction and disruptions of supplies and strategic communications, the erosion of reserves, etc.

In this article, the term *exhaustion* will be used when Svechin writes about strategy of exhaustion, even if the English translation uses attrition. The term *attrition* will be used in the discussion of wearing down enemy formations by combat and fires.

When Svechin discussed strategies of destruction and exhaustion, he analysed them primarily in light of the First World War. In describing a strategy of destruction, he emphasised the ultimate decisiveness of the offensive:

Destruction is characterized by the belief that one operational starting position is enough to achieve the ultimate aim. Destruction operations that are continuous in space almost coalesce in their striving for the ultimate goal. Communications are protected by the very real danger of destruction of every enemy detachment that turned up behind our flanks. The enemy's goals are subordinate to the goals pursued by the side inflicting a destructive strike. The logic and sequence are completely clear.

This paragraph could have been written to describe the Russian full-scale invasion 24 February 2022. It was about maximum commitment of forces, where “the concept of a strategic reserve radically contradicts the ideas of destruction, which require extreme intensity to achieve success at a decisive point.” The idea that

modern war had made a strategy of destruction extremely difficult and risky was a central theme in Svechin's analysis of strategies of destruction and exhaustion. In his chapter "Combining Operations for Achieving the Ultimate Goal of the War", he related the choice of strategy to the political purpose with the war:

In discussing the political goal of a war, we arrived at the conclusion that the political leadership is responsible for orienting the operations of the armed front toward destruction or attrition after attentive discussions with strategists. The contradiction between these forms is much deeper, more important and fraught with more significant consequences than the contradiction between the defensive and the offensive.

Svechin further discussed the Napoleonic influence upon the idea of destruction, and the risks involved. The issue is that an attacker pursuing a strategy of destruction only gets one chance. There is no room for second guessing or adjustments when the operation rolls: "There is only one pure line of destruction and there is only one correct decision; in essence a military leader is deprived of freedom of choice because his duty is to understand the decisions dictated by the situation." There is a singlemindedness that is emphasised by that "[A] strategy of destruction requires yet another premise, namely the extraordinary victory." It is make or break. If the operation fails and the enemy has mobilised and is prepared for a war of exhaustion, a failed main operation in a strategy of destruction will easily leave the attacker out of balance, wrong footed, and in a wrong direction.

In discussing a strategy of exhaustion, Svechin stated that the term "is a very poor expression of all the diverse shades of different strategic methods outside the realm of destruction." While destruction is narrow and single-minded, exhaustion is wide and multi-faceted:

A strategy of destruction is unified and allows for only one correct decision. In a strategy of exhaustion the intensity of armed conflict may vary, and thus each level of intensity may have its own correct decision. One can determine the level of intensity required by a given situation only through very careful study of economic and political conditions. A very broad range is opened up for politics, and strategy should be very flexible.

Strategic choices in a war of exhaustion are not tied to the one decisive operation as in a strategy of destruction. Svechin emphasised that in a strategy of exhaustion, the military operations and efforts have to be closely in tune with the developments in other sectors, such as

economy, industry, and perhaps more important, the development of alliances and foreign support. Warfare as "a continuation political intercourse, carried on with other means" is much more dependent of the other means in a strategy of exhaustion. This in turn may be an advantage for armed forces that consists of a large proportion of reservists, which by their civilian profession and knowledge can contribute to the flexibility strategy need in these circumstances.

Operations in a strategy of exhaustion would have a different purpose than in a strategy of destruction. Operations are only one of several means to exhaust the enemy and must therefore be tuned to the logic of exhaustion:

The operations of a strategy of exhaustion are not so much direct stages toward the achievement of an ultimate goal as they are stages in the deployment of material superiority, which would ultimately deprive the enemy of the means for successful resistance.

Military operations in a strategy of destruction are typically limited, and it is the accumulation of successes that will be military decisive. Economy, allies, and armament industry are the material preconditions for a strategy of exhaustion. Operations should aim indirectly and synchronisation between different theatres or areas of operations, might tie down and limit the enemy's use of his reserves. Long term goals should also guide planning, not least because the time needed to mobilise the economy and industry. There is no need to concentrate the majority of the armed forces for decisive operations in pursuing a strategy of exhaustion. It is preferable to conduct operations with a limited aim, both to gain important terrain and to inflict casualties:

Small separate attacks may be even more economical than a single major operation. They make it possible to avoid the loss of time and effort, which are always the excess cost of a major concentration, [...]. If the enemy's reserves have been exhausted and small operations are undertaken simultaneously, the latter have the opportunity to maintain the initiative that have been seized almost as long as major operations. Foch's offensive in the second half of 1918 had this kind of divided nature.

This paragraph is the only place where Svechin explicitly credited the Allied supreme commander General Ferdinand Foch with his strategic direction of operations in modern war. Given the Bolshevik political environment Svechin operated in, any positive credit to outsiders for one's own opinions would have been highly risky. This issue aside, in this part of

the chapter “Combining Operations for Achieving the Ultimate Goal of the War”, Svechin is specific regarding how operations best can be conducted in a strategy of exhaustion, not least how to maintain the initiative where operations are limited in size and depth. On the other hand, Svechin was not a “prophet of exhaustion”. He did not rule out vigorous destructive operations when opportunity permitted. His critique of Russian General Brusilov’s 1916 offensive in Galicia is an illustrative example of the need to exploit opportunities and concentrate when the situation is favourable [11].

An important issue for operations in a strategy of exhaustion, especially offensive operations, is to prevent them to develop into a sluggish attrition, where one’s own casualties becomes too large to sustain. To balance gains and costs is a critical issue for the strategic leadership. In a strategy of exhaustion, it is therefore important to limit own losses while wearing down the enemy. Svechin, again implicitly, referred to Allied strategy and operations on the Western Front in 1918:

The duty of strategy is to keep offensive operations from getting drawn out to the last gasp; great leadership ability is required to stop an offensive in time without getting distracted by minor partial successes which could still be achieved. As soon as our forces lose their tactical advantages, the strategist must reexamine the issue of continuing an operation and end it at an appropriate line and sometimes even abandon some of the territory that has been captured [7].

The first British led offensive that began on 8 August 1918, the Amiens-Montdidier operation, was halted on the fourth day after a stunning initial success. It was the commander of the Canadian Corps, Lieutenant General Arthur Currie, that approached his Army commander Rawlinson, and asked to halt the offensive because the Germans had committed their reserves in prepared positions, and any further attacks would only cause large casualties with very limited gains. Rawlinson took the issue to Field Marshal Haig, who was the Army Group commander, and they managed to convince Foch to stop this operation. But Foch demanded another offensive, and later in August, the British Second and Fifth armies attacked, and the French Tenth Army began attacking on 20 August [12].

The decision that was reached at Amiens, was this “great leadership ability [is] required to stop an offensive in time without getting distracted by minor partial successes which could still be achieved [7].” The task for strategy on the industrialised battlefield of the Western Front was

to accumulate the “minor partial successes” into the final defeat of the enemy. After almost four years of failed breakthrough attempts, the Allies finally found out how to wage modern war. The issue of breakthrough and deep exploitation is within the logic of a strategy of destruction, although Foch reportedly did not “believed in the possibility of a ‘breakthrough’, with decisive results, between two armies of equal fighting value.” [13] It was upon this new way of warfare that emerged on the Western Front that Svechin modelled his understanding of modern strategy and the new military discipline, operational art.

**Destruction and exhaustion in the Russo-Ukraine War.** This part will discuss some of the military operations and how their conduct and purpose reflect strategies of destruction and exhaustion. The author has not insight into the strategic and operational planning by the Armed Forces of Ukraine, so the analysis is based on open-source information, reports, and articles.

Svechin’s discussion of the characteristics and risks in a strategy of destruction in modern war as outlined in the previous part. These are to a large extent a blueprint for the Russian invasion of Ukraine 24 February 2022. As presented in the beginning of the article, the invasion also resembles regime change strategies conducted by the Soviet Union. But there were some fundamental differences.

First of all, Russia is not the Soviet Union and do not have the military might of the Soviet Army, nor Soviet’s former East European allies in the Warsaw Pact. More importantly, Russia did not have any strategic or operational surprise. Its entire deployment in the late autumn 2021 and into the winter of 2022 was for an open stage. Everything that could report on the deployment did so, from social media OSINT activists, via national and international media, to United States intelligence services. The only uncertainty in the public domain was whether Russia intended to invade, given that all plans had been blown.

But the fundamental difference from previous Soviet invasions of allies in Eastern Europe, such as Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968, or Afghanistan in 1979, was that Ukraine already was at war with Russia. Ukraine had prepared for a Russian escalation since the Minsk II agreement in 2015 and invested in defence reform and rearmament under the threat of renewed hostilities. The question was not if, Russia would escalate, but when and how.

The Russian invasion appeared to have its main effort towards the Ukrainian political leadership to create chaos and a leadership vacuum for the Russian Armed Forces to exploit.

This approach is described as a *Decapitation Strategy*, where an actor aims to paralyse the opponent by eliminating leaders to cause collapse or a swift degradation of the state. Usually followed by replacing the political leadership. Ukrainian military commanders were reportedly offered to lay down their arms and step aside, as in Crimea in 2014. The invasion with military forces should support the political decapitation, using speed and shock; directly by air assault units (VDV) that were to swiftly enter Kyiv after capturing the Hostomel airfield, and indirectly by deep penetration by mechanised forces to establish facts on the ground. If necessary, the armed columns should engage and defeat the Armed Forces of Ukraine, while the main units of the Ukrainian Army were tied down along the Donbas front [14].

The Russian assumptions of a Ukrainian collapse may explain the peculiar force composition of the Russian invading army. The Russian columns consisted of Battalion Tactical Groups (BTG), a tactically strong reinforced mechanised battalion manned with contract soldiers. These BTG were optimised for speed and shock but were not supported by heavier follow-on forces. Most of them were under strength and especially lacking infantry, which made them vulnerable, both to regular mechanised brigades and light forces operating in the flanks and in urban environments.

Russia set up three operational commands based on the Eastern, Southern, and Western military districts (MD). The Eastern MD operated with one group in Belarus and one in Gomel and was to advance on Kyiv. The Western MD had three groups deployed in Kursk, Belgorod, and Voronezh oblasts; the Kursk group should advance on Kyiv, the two others cut off the part of the Ukrainian army expected to be on the Donbas front. The Southern MD would seize important objectives in the south and was set up in occupied Crimea. There would also be strategic strikes with missiles and aircrafts, and special operations forces (SOF) and VDV were to secure strategic infrastructure.

When the invasion began during the night of 24 February 2022, the Russians were able to temporarily weaken the Ukrainian strategic command and control systems (C2IS), and initially secure the Hostomel airport to receive reinforcements by air. A Ukrainian counterattack recaptured the airport before the reinforcements were able to land and destroyed the runway in the process. As the Russian operators in Kyiv were defeated and the Ukrainian army units began

engaging the BTGs, the Russian strategy of destruction failed within the first week [16].

When the Russian invasion struck, it had immediate international implications when both EU and USA committed themselves to stand by Ukraine. That meant that two of the world's three largest economies promised to sustain Ukraine's war effort. Despite Russia's superior resource base, its economy is way behind EU's and USA's. Russia was forced to revise its strategy and decide what to do next. Ukraine's mobilisation of its reserves, including standing up a territorial defence force, allowed it to match the Russian Armed Forces deployed in Ukraine. The character of the war had definitively changed into a war of exhaustion.

By the end of March and early April, Russia pulled out from two out of three operational directions: the Eastern MD from the Kyiv region, and the Western MD from the northeast while still threatening Kharkiv. The Southern MD was given the overall command over operations and ambitions were limited to "liberating" the annexed Ukraine counties Luhansk and Donetsk and hold what else Russia had occupied.

The Russians deployed the headquarters of the First Guard Tank Army (1. GTA) to the Izium area, moved several mechanised units to the area, and established what appeared as an operative manoeuvre group (OMG) that would threaten to encircle and destroy the Ukrainian forces defending Donbas. Such an option would be a decisive operation that would support a continued strategy of destruction. That option never materialised, primarily due to Ukrainian actions in the area.

In mid-May began what is known as "The Battle of Donbas". The Russians began their offensive to capture and occupy what was left of Luhansk County. Massive artillery bombardments preceded frontal infantry assaults supported by armour. Despite the massive use of artillery, the Russian infantry took massive casualties and lack of effective combined arms tactics caused large losses of combat vehicles. Progress was at the best one to two kilometres a day in the sector of concentration. The massive use of artillery made the Ukraine defensive combat untenable and they pulled back to the Northern Donets River. When Ukraine began deploying US delivered GPS-guided long-range missiles launched by the HIMARS, they were able to strike Russian artillery logistics and reduce the effect of Russian indirect fires to the point that they no longer could maintain the offensive at the same intensity.

Russia then declared an operational pause before their next offensive [17].

After the pause, the Russian began a new offensive in Donetsk County, its main effort was directed towards Bakhmut. Due to HIMARS and western 155 mm calibre field artillery, the Russian superiority in heavy fires was reduced. On the other hand, they improved their assault tactics to the point they managed to advance. At this point the Russians used conscripted troops from the occupied areas to advance when the artillery barrage was lifted and force the Ukrainian defenders to expose their positions. Then would assault groups from either Naval Infantry, VDV or the private contractor Wagner Group attack under cover of directed fires. They were able to break into the defences, but not through. The advance was still slow and costly. The offensive began in August, and it was not until December the first Russian units had advanced less than ten kilometres and reached the outskirts of Bakhmut. It took the Russians, spearheaded by VDV and the Wagner Group, another five months to capture the city. By then the Ukrainian Armed Forces had already begun counterattacks on both flanks, maintaining pressure on the Russians around Bakhmut.

The two Russian offensives in Donbas in 2022 were characterised of a slow and sluggish attritional advance along a narrow front. It was not what was expected by “the second most powerful Army in the World” that also claimed military parity with the US. The large losses resembled Soviet General and military theorist Georgii Isserson’s criticism of the breakthrough battles on the Western Front in the First World War:

The system of battles for attrition was incapable of finding an operational solution to the problem of breaching the continuous front, and was therefor senseless. As for exhausting the enemy, the system exhausted the attackers more than defenders. The whole thing was a senseless system of self-attrition.

The Russian Armed Forces initiated a similar attritional offensive to cut of the salient around the city of Avdiivka, northwest of Donetsk in early November 2023. The Russians are making a slow and painstaking progress at heavy costs against a determined Ukrainian defence. It appears that the Russian High Command accepts the serious losses in men and materiel as long as they can replace the losses. The question is if it is possible for the Ukrainian forces to sustain a viable defence in such a meat grinder without being ground to pieces themselves [18].

Ukraine offensive operations in 2022 were markedly different from the Russian ones, and also equally different from each other.

In early May 2022, the Ukrainian Chief of Defence (CHOD) announced that the Armed Forces of Ukraine had initiated offensives by Kharkiv and Izium. The purpose at Kharkiv was to force the Russian troops out of range, so they were not able to bombard the city with regular artillery. The aims at Izium were to force the Russians out of the area and weaken the Russian supply lines. The offensive had already progressed some time when the announcement was made, and Ukrainian forces reached the Russian border north of Kharkiv by 15 May, even if the Russian still held Ukrainian territory north of the city [19].

This first Ukrainian Kharkiv offensive had limited operational ambitions but was tactical successful compared to the rather sluggish Russian Donbas offensive. More importantly, the offensive initiated a struggle for the strategic initiative. The Russians seemed to be locked in an attritional struggle in Luhansk at the time and was not able to respond to the Ukrainian limited push north of Kharkiv.

By late May the Ukrainian forces were actively engaging the Russian units west of the Dnipro River in the southern part of the country, reportedly targeting Russian land lines of communications (LLOC) [20]. By late July, the Antonivsky bridge at Kherson had been repeatedly struck by HIMARS rockets and made unusable for military traffic. The Russian forces west of the river was in a position of being isolated [21]. There were continuous combat west of the river the entire summer. On 29 August, Ukraine announced officially that a counter offensive had begun in Kherson and Mykolaiv counties. Strikes were directed at river crossings, while ground attacks were causing attrition of units and supplies. Ukraine also kept tight operational security, which contributed to media attention towards the fighting in the south.

Screened by the attention towards the Kherson offensive, Ukraine was able to exploit Russian weakness and concentrate at least five mobile brigades southeast of Kharkiv city. The Armed Forces of Ukraine achieved complete surprise when they crossed the Northern Donets River 4 September. By the next days, Russian defences was penetrated north of Izium. In less than a week, Ukrainian forces reached Kupiansk by the Oskil River and cut the vital railway that was the supply line for the Russian OMG at Izium. The Russian units were forced to retreat and hurried east, leaving equipment and

ammunition behind. Russian counter strikes failed, and the retreat turned into a rout several places [22].

8 October 2022 was the Kerch Bridge sabotaged and both rail and road traffic was temporarily disbanded. That increased the problematic supply situation for the Russian forces north of Dnipro River in Kherson. Continuous Ukraine pressure on the ground and attrition by artillery forced the Russians to evacuate the bridgehead, destroying the bridges as they went. On 11 November Kherson City was captured without having to conquer it by force, and the ground north of the river was liberated [23]. Thus ended the Ukrainian offensives before the winter.

**Conclusions.** The three Ukrainian offensives described above were very different in size and form. There were of course a lot of other less distinct offensive actions in the area, but these offensives are illustrative of the spectre of operational opportunities in a strategy of exhaustion. The purpose of military operations in a strategy of exhaustion is to accumulate gains where it is possible and to acceptable costs. At the same time, all the other means of the state will on one hand support the military operations, and on the other, exploit the successes to contribute to the progress at the political, diplomatic, and strategic arenas.

The first Kharkiv offensive achieved its tactical aim of forcing the Russian forces away from Kharkiv to relieve the city from direct artillery bombardment. The offensive also initiated – by design or default – the struggle for the strategic initiative. Despite the ongoing Russian offensive in Donbas, the Armed Forces of Ukraine has conducted independent offensive operations and actions at selected parts of the front, while defending against the Russian attacks. After Ukraine received long range precision rocket artillery (HIMARS), the Ukrainians were able to conduct tactical and operational targeted attrition against key components of the Russian Armed Forces combat system. These strikes reduced the combat power of the Russian artillery and took of some of the pressure on the Ukrainian defenders.

The strategic direction of the Kherson offensive and the second Kharkiv offensive is an example of the role of strategy within the framework of exhaustion. Whether it was intended to use the Kherson offensive to draw both attention and Russian forces to the southern front, or it just happened, is less important. The issue is that in a strategy of exhaustion, operations with a limited aim serve an important

role to accumulate tactical and operational gains that each are building blocks towards the strategic objective. Similarly, if the sabotage on the Kerch Bridge on 8 October was deliberately timed to coincide with the Kherson offensive or not, it served that purpose when it severed the LLOC to the Russian forces in the south.

The Kherson and second Kharkiv offensives also differed in forms. The Kherson offensive was to a large extent a form of mobile attrition, where firepower and the destruction of both Russian tactical units. The severing of the LLOC by attacking the bridges over Dnipro, forced the Russians to make difficult decisions. The second Kharkiv on the other hand, was a classic example of mobile warfare with decisive operational results, leaving the Russians to retreat or be surrounded and destroyed. The key in this case was also the Russian LLOC, the railroad junction at Kupiansk.

The warfare after November 2022 have to a large extent been attritional at all levels. The Russian missile and drone offensive to destroy Ukrainian critical infrastructure and the civilian will to resist, is an attempt of strategic exhaustion. The effect of the offensive was reduced by Ground Based Air Defences and the constant repair and replacements of destroyed components. This is the first time since cruise missiles was fielded in the 1980, that air defences had been able to severely limit their effectiveness. It is also the first time that strategic rocket and missiles had been used against a large country with regular armed forces equipped with a balanced and layered air defence system.

Ukraine's attacks against Russian strategic targets have been most effective against the Russian Black Sea Fleet, depriving it of its main base Sevastopol on occupied Crimea. Especially the cruise missile attack against the dry dock, destroying a Ropucha-class landing ship and a Kilo class submarine, rendering the dock useless for weeks if not months. This strike reflected Ukraine's deliberate targeting of high-level logistics. If the dry dock is non-operational, even smaller damage of larger warships may be hard to repair. Forcing the Black Sea Fleet off the western Black Sea has also allowed Ukraine to open its own shipping corridor for export from the Odesa region, reaching an export volume larger than the maximum for the 2022 Grain initiative.

To close with quoting Svechin once more. In a strategy of exhaustion, it is less about the strategic decisiveness of military operations, but it is how operations contribute to the overall strategic objectives:



A strategy of destruction is unified and allows for only one correct decision (white). In a strategy of exhaustion, the intensity of armed conflict may vary and thus each level of intensity may have its own correct decision. One can determine the level of intensity required by a given situation only through very careful study of economic and political conditions. A very broad range is opened up for politics, and strategy should be very flexible.

**Further research.** Two decades of western counterinsurgencies against terror groups and small groups of tribal warriors, contributed to a perception of warfare as something to be managed and controlled at a distance by superior technology and small high quality professional forces. The Hezbollah-Israel War in 2006 caused some concern and raised the question if western armed forces had become so enmeshed in fighting insurgencies that they had forgotten all about regular warfare. Did the decades long western small wars experience made it difficult to comprehend the character of the Russian-Ukrainian War, both since 2014, but especially after the 2022 invasion?

The tactical learning curve of both Ukraine and Russia is at least as steep as on the Western Front in The First World War, where modern land warfare had to be invented from Private to General. Then it was the effects of the rifle-rail-telegraph revolution that caused a revolution in firepower, lorries and tanks and radio technology. We are currently spectators to how the information technology revolution is reducing the previous generation of top-notch military hardware to rubble. We are now in a 1918 moment; how will low-level tactics adapt to the new technologies on an old fashion battlefield? Similarly, how will higher tactics (division and higher) and operational art have to evolve to catch up with changes in technology low-level tactics?

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### Стратегія і операції у війні на виснаження

#### Анотація

У статті оцінено стратегію і війну в Україні у світлі радянських стратегічних дебатів 100-річної давнини. *Мета* – поставити під сумнів життєздатність стратегічної мети повалення іншої держави за допомогою військової сили. Це зроблено в рамках класичних дебатів про стратегії руйнування та виснаження з 1880-х до 1920-х років. Ці дебати також допоможуть пояснити фундаментальні зміни в характері війни після відновлення спроб РФ повалити Україну шляхом повномасштабного вторгнення взимку 2022 року.

Основним теоретичним джерелом є книга радянського генерала Олександра Свечина "Стратегія" 1927 року. Свій історичний метод та інтерпретації сучасної стратегії Свечин базує на працях німецького військового історика Ганса Дельбрюка. Дельбрюк ініціював так звану німецьку стратегічну суперечку між собою та історичним відділом німецького Великого генерального штабу. Спочатку палкі дебати точилися навколо того, чи використовував прусський король Фрідріх Великий стратегію руйнування або виснаження під час Семирічної війни 1756–1763 років. Це також були дебати про історію як науку і про зловживання історією для легітимізації доктрини.

Три українські наступальні операції, описані вище, були дуже різними за розміром і формою. Ці наступальні операції ілюструють спектр оперативних можливостей в стратегії виснаження. Метою військових операцій в стратегії виснаження є накопичення здобутків там, де це можливо, і за прийнятних витрат. При цьому всі інші засоби держави будуть, з одного боку, підтримувати військові операції, а з іншого – використовувати успіхи для сприяння прогресу на політичній, дипломатичній і стратегічній аренах.

Стратегія руйнування уніфікована і допускає лише одне правильне рішення (білі). У стратегії виснаження інтенсивність збройного конфлікту може змінюватися, а отже, для кожного рівня інтенсивності може бути своє правильне рішення.

**Ключові слова:** руйнування; виснаження; зміна характеру війни; адаптація.