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[Russia's Messner Doctrine?](#)



Theresa May, Britain's Prime Minister, has [called](#) the attempted poisoning of the ex-spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter "an unlawful use of force" by the Russian state against the United Kingdom. Her accusation is based on her government's forensics team discovering traces of [Novichok](#), a toxic family of nerve agents produced by the Russian state for military purposes. The traces were found in Salisbury, a quintessentially calm and quiet English town, parts of which were then temporarily and hastily evacuated.

If this chemical weapon was indeed used by the Russian secret services or affiliated individuals, the implications are far-reaching. But is this really so unexpected? Hasn't Russia [long been](#) in a state of war with the Western world? The standoff, if that is what we choose to call it, has now deteriorated to new levels. Its full danger is only just dawning in the West: President Putin quite recently [threatened](#) the West with the use of nuclear weapons in a speech. By doing so, old superpower management tools such as pledges of no first use have been dismantled; both Russia and the U.S. now include pre-emptive nuclear strikes in their doctrines.

Tracing back through these last tense few years, it is possible to see how the situation can be analyzed from the point of view of a certain non-classical military theory. This was first put forward long ago by Evgeny

Messner, a former serviceman of the Kornilov Division, a professor of military theory and officer of the Imperial Russian Army. Messner had published a number of articles and books in the 1950s-70s after emigrating to Argentina. These are devoted to his theory of "myatezhevoina" ("mutiny war" or "subversive war").

His views throughout are based not only on his remarkable personal experience as a serviceman during the Russian Civil War, but also his professional assessment of World War II as well as conflicts in Spain, Algeria, the Middle East, Korea and Vietnam. Messner's understanding of subversive war differs from today's notion of hybrid war as defined by many contemporary experts. Instead, for Messner, any shadow war is just a secondary feature of what he terms "subversive war." To put it in a broader context, he makes no reference to Freudian group psychology, nor to many philosophical texts devoted to political analysis of the development of mass society. Still, he draws on works by Gustave Le Bon and his personal experience to make a precise assessment of the changes that have occurred in political life and public perceptions of war during the 20th century, many of which have lasted to this day. Having analyzed its impact on the art of war, Messner formulated three key stratagems for warfare under these new conditions.

First, Messner believes that contemporary war cannot be perceived as a monolithic and strictly centralized strategic action. Contemporary warfare is total in its nature and involves all categories of society, which means that it spans across different layers of society, both technically and in terms of the nature and essence of military operations. Thus, for example, the mass nature of war decreases the fierceness of hostilities, extends their duration and increases the variety of simultaneous military activities: from clashes between regular armies to actions by commandos, rebels, terrorists and saboteurs. This changes a military conflict into a structure without a single clearly defined front, nor clearly defined frontier, nor even permanent participants. While regular armies can follow certain conventions, define the line of contact and the rear, their actions can be accompanied by partisan attacks, mass guerilla movements on occupied territories or hostilities between groups with conflicting interests on territories controlled by the enemies. Consequently, war loses its clear boundaries.

Not only can the infrastructures and composition of the warring parties overlap, but the warring parties can change sides and intermingle to a certain extent. Irregular formations emerge and disappear, change sides, become more active or dormant, and undertake independent and unconventional actions based on their own interests or common interests, as understood by them. Messner concludes that direct and centralized strategic management is no longer possible under these conditions, because there are too many layers, too many actors with diverse interests, different military capabilities, discipline and stability, while the theatre of war is undefined. Therefore, the role of propaganda and psychological pressure on the general public in managing military operations becomes paramount - something which used to play a mere auxiliary role.

According to Messner, psychological pressure on the public fulfils two major tasks: to mobilize friendly groups and hamper the enemy's psychological mobilization. Various methods of exerting influence are employed, from seduction and intimidation to the establishment of ideologies, the spread of pacifist sentiments or the involvement of a "fifth column," separatist or radical political groups of hostile societies. The main goal is to control minds, to create a certain semantic, axiological and primarily emotional field that mobilizes friendly groups and demoralizes alien ones at the same time, no matter whether on one's own territory or that of the enemy. This psychological warfare is waged globally against one's own or another population. There are groups that are for and against, both on one's own and the enemy's territory, and their citizenship no longer plays a decisive role.

Therefore, the very notion of territory loses its significance. Messner discusses global war - the Third World War. He moves from military theory to globalist ideology, where individual military actions are only elements of a meta-strategy of global dissemination of a psychological effect. With this, Messner comes very close to the idea of hegemony as understood by Antonio Gramsci, although there is no indication that he was familiar with Gramsci's works. Nevertheless, it is obvious that military actions themselves turn into instruments of global psychological strategies under new conditions of warfare. This conclusion from Messner's theory found its confirmation in reality: examples include the Tet Offensive during the Vietnam War; the strategy of numerous rebel and terrorist movements of the turn of the century; the course of local conflicts, terrorist strategies and contemporary TV wars. The same goes for the Crimean campaign in the aftermath of the war against Georgia, hybrid war in eastern Ukraine and commercial operations in Syria: The main goal is not war itself but

influencing minds, increasing humanitarian pressure on the European Union and drawing the U.S. into another war in the Middle East (Obama did not succumb to the pressure, while Trump's campaign is in full swing). Support for anti-democratic ultra-right movements in Europe and attempts to influence elections in Italy, Germany, France and the U.S. are the other side of the coin.

It is difficult to judge to what extent Russian political actors consciously pursue these stratagems. However, it is noteworthy that Messner's works were re-issued in 2005, as part of the 21st edition of the compilation "The Military University *The Russian Way*". The publication was launched by the Russian Way publishing house, run by Viktor Moskvina, a renowned historian of the Russian expatriate community, closely associated with the authorities and President Putin himself since 2012. It is beyond doubt that only Messner's theory can be seen as a common meta-stratagem for major events in Russia's domestic and foreign policy since 2008 or even earlier, given the propaganda campaign prior to the war against Ossetia. It is noteworthy that the onion structure of managing subversive war can also be logically derived from it. Such a disperse structure can only be managed by what is [called](#) "the night state" by Konstantin Gaaze. Eurasia enthusiasts and Dugin followers describe it using a "[deep state](#)" conspiracy theory. In other words, a relatively small circle of stakeholders or insiders of the strategic plan fulfill the true task of the psychological-effect strategy (which brings to mind the delusional but structurally significant notion of the noosphere in the hands of the incumbent head of the presidential administration). By building a clientele-like structure, this group retains power and moves in a certain direction with no exact action plan. It reacts spontaneously to circumstances and delegates powers to state and non-state actors (the Wagner Group, for example) that are unrelated to each other.

Then comes Messner's key concept: the notion of re-revolution. Messner assessed the history of the first half of the 20th century as resulting from the global revolution caused by the participation of the masses in politics (in line with De Tocqueville's ideas). Predicting the onset of reaction, he believed that a return to the previous *status quo* was impossible. Therefore, the reaction was supposed to assume the form of a continuation of the revolution, i.e. a re-revolution. From Messner's perspective, ideologically, re-revolution is based on new forms of traditionalism and conservatism. He is quite accurate here, too: religious re-revolution in Iran and Afghanistan, where radical Islam was at the core of resistance against Soviet invasion and Islamists who easily cracked down on the initially secular color revolutions during the early 2000s. Developed countries traditionally take pride in their superiority in terms of technology, economics and production of meanings related to the progress of mankind. However, the man in the street does not trust progress, but rather fears it. Russian propaganda, Russia's domestic and foreign policy bets on the [archaization and rejection](#) of Western values. This seems to be an effective asymmetrical response to the supremacy of Western super powers. It is a global, poly-Orthodox ideology taking advantage of the weak spot of Western democracies suffering from a lack of trust from their own citizens (to use the Bulgarian thinker Ivan Krastev's words). Russian propaganda is succeeding, which is confirmed by the measures undertaken by Europe and the U.S. to fight it. The secret at the heart of its success is simplification and archaism.

Propaganda offers the revolutionary charm of simplification and direct action understandable by mass consciousness, as opposed to complexity of political life in Europe. The effect in Russia's domestic politics is far more spectacular. A mix of neo-pagans, Orthodox Christians, fascists, Nazis and all sorts of historic re-enactors like Igor Strelkov and pseudo-Cossack formations have [become](#) the main protagonists of the Russian hybrid wars of this decade. It is amazing and shocking how this archaic anti-Western discourse is capable of mobilizing people with diverse views.

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