

# The Utility of Force, by Rupert Smith

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*Rupert Smith is a retired British general who participated in Britain's reaction to the troubles in Northern Ireland, the Iraq wars and Serbia. His description of war - objectives, organization, success factors and so on - is outstanding.*

*Though he describes how a war such as that Russia has initiated as an anachronism, his historical analysis is very illuminating. Here is the review I have submitted to Amazon.*

The Utility of Force - Rupert Smith

**Describes Ukraine to a T – despite predicting that such antiquated warfare would never recur**

The war between Russia and Ukraine is what Smith would call an interstate industrial war. He describes such wars in great detail in part one of this book, concluding that they are a thing of the past. The massive destruction of World War II, and the advent of the atom bomb meant that industrial war could not take place in the modern world.

There had been small exceptions. Saddam Hussein was such a palooka that he attempted to fight the conventional armies of the West. He got slaughtered. Argentina's grab of the Falkland Islands in 1982 provoked a very small scale industrial war. Argentina got slaughtered. According to Smith, industrial war between two equivalent powers should have been a thing of the past. It made no sense.

That is the conclusion of Part One of this book, the table of contents of which are listed at the end. Vladimir Vladimirovych Putin didn't get the message.

None of us living in Ukraine, including Pres. Zelensky and myself, could believe that Putin would be so stupid as to launch a war. Ukraine is big geographically. It had a large army and a significant population, between one third and one quarter that of Russia. Ukraine had struggled constantly to free itself from the time Russia took over in 1648, including brief periods of freedom after World War I and constant partisan activity under the Soviet Union. Ukraine had found its feet and was prospered for the last two decades.

The question appeared not to be whether Russia could conquer Ukraine militarily – many of us believed that it could – but whether they could successfully occupy a country that didn't want them. The Chechnyans did not give up until Putin bombed them flat. The 2014 war in Donbass made a wreck out of the place, with the most capable people fleeing to the West and leaving Putin the expensive liability of taking care of pensioners in clapped out coal country.

Putin's takeover of Crimea was relatively swift and bloodless. The Russians were already there in large numbers staffing the port of Sevastopol for which they had a long-term lease from Ukraine. The citizens were not uniformly opposed. The Autonomous Republic of Crimea had remained a thing apart ever since its agglomeration into Ukraine by Khrushchev in 1954.

The People's Republics of Donetsk and Lugansk were a different story. Albeit primarily Russian-speaking, they were for the most part happy to be part of Ukraine. Russia used the age-old communist technique of sponsoring a "spontaneous people's uprising" and then rushing to support it once it found its legs. They initiated such uprisings in many cities, among them Odessa and Kharkiv as well as Donetsk and Lugansk. Only in the latter two did they get traction. It was clear that the people did not want them.

Though Yanukovich and his predecessors had thoroughly eviscerated the Ukrainian military, volunteer battalions from all over Ukraine, disproportionately the West, rushed to defend against the Russian takeover. The UN-sponsored Minsk agreements of 2014 resulted in a cease-fire in which Ukraine retained most of the

land in both of these oblasts, though the principal cities went with the People's republics. The cease-fire line held, though there was artillery shelling both ways.

That was the status quo as of early 2022. It was clear that most of the Russian-speaking people in eastern Ukraine did not want to be part of Russia.

From 2014 to 2022 Ukraine, with the help of Western advisors and suppliers, steadily improved its military. More important than equipment was training and doctrine. Ukraine built a professional army with organization and practices consistent with what Rupert Smith prescribes in this book. The deleterious effect of Russia's lack of these things has been a surprise to most observers.

Enough background – here is the book review.

Rupert Smith offers bullet pointed analyses of most of the aspects of war. First would be that war involves at least three parties:

1. The politicians, who use diplomacy, economic and other means to achieve national objectives, resorting to war only when all else fails. Politicians set the overall objectives of a war.
2. The military, which establishes the strategy, operations and tactics by which the political objectives are to be obtained.
3. The people, who provide the tax base to support the war, the volunteers and conscripts to fight the war, and the political base of the politicians.

Napoleon was the first to operate on a philosophy of total war, involving all three elements. Prior to that nobleman had been able to use their armed forces to achieve political objectives such as expanding their realms without great concern for popular support.

Smith also says that Napoleon initiated the concept of total war. Previous wars would most often result in a negotiated settlement, with the rulers remaining in place but simply moving national borders around. Napoleon favored large, decisive battles after which the defeated army was no longer an effective fighting force.

The characteristics of a military engaged in industrial war are as follows:

- **Conscription:** mass armies require masses of people, and therefore compulsory military service.
- **Mobilization:** rather than a standing army, the country must have a plan to mobilize quickly in preparation for a war. Preparation involves systems of transportation, training, and the logistics to support them.
- **Professionalism:** there must be a core of trained and organized professional soldiers ready to absorb the masses of conscripts and organize them to conduct the fight at hand. The budget must be adequate to support this peacetime military.
- **Technological development:** each nation must continue to improve its military hardware through research and development and equipment upgrades. This has meant over time incorporating technologies such as railroads, telegraph, radios, and now satellites, the Internet, and nuclear.

Morale is key. Napoleon considered a force with high morale to be the equal of a force three times its size without it. Napoleon's soldiers were fighting for their own country, France, and their Republican form of government. It gave them a decisive advantage over the reluctant soldiers forced into battle by noblemen.

Compare this with Russia's situation. Many of the soldiers in Ukraine are not ethnic Russians. The worst atrocities are committed by Buryats, Dagastanis and Chechens. They do not feel Russian, don't get along terribly well with each other, and are often not literate enough to read maps and instructions.

Russia has always been strongly hierarchical. In his 1839 Letters from Russia the Marquis de Custine writes that the czar is the most powerful man on earth. Nobody would talk back to him. On the other hand, this very power isolated him. His courtiers could not afford to tell him the truth. One senses that this is true Putin as well. He blundered because neither his military commanders nor is FSB intelligence organization would tell him what he did not want to hear.

The hierarchy holds all the way down the chain of command. Russian generals are being killed at the front because they cannot trust their subordinates with broad objectives. The generals have to dictate everything. It is not "get to the other side of the river by tomorrow" but "build a bridge at XYZ coordinates by 18:00 and roll 30 tanks over it from then until 22:00." Smith stresses repeatedly that war is full of surprises, and the side that reacts best to surprises will win.

Many top Ukrainian officers went over to Russia in 2014. It may be a benefit that Ukraine essentially built its military from the ground up. They employ Western doctrine and training. Noncommissioned and lower ranking officers are used to making decisions on their own, with the senior officers setting objectives but not dictating how they are to be met.

The Ukrainian army has proved its flexibility in implementing its own military solutions. They use commercial drones to great effect to drop antitank grenades. They use farm equipment to cart off abandoned Russian military vehicles. They have been very adept at learning to use Western provided man carried antiaircraft and anti-armor weaponry, and are now putting Western artillery to good use.

My closing point with regard to industrial war is that Ukraine is in one, and Ukraine's doctrine, tactics and training are consistent with Rupert Smith's observations with regard to best practice.

Part two of the book addresses the developments of the Cold War period. The countries that had engaged in industrial war during the first half of the century focused more on defense than offense. They formed large organizations such as NATO and the now defunct SEATO and others for mutual defense. The Soviet Union had the Warsaw Pact.

Coalition warfare required that the commander recognize a number of new constraints. The first was rules of engagement, circumscribing what a commander could do. The second was the recognition that a multinational force cannot be operated as a unified whole, but must be used in its component parts. Moreover, each national contingent may be subject to different constraints.

This part of the book is interesting and relevant to small confrontations and conflicts around the world, but not relevant to the Ukraine war. Smith describes the difference between confrontations and conflicts in detail. A confrontation is a situation in which nations disagree, such as between Russia and Japan over the Kuril islands or India and Pakistan over the Kashmir. A conflict occurs when a confrontation devolves into shooting.

Part three of the book addresses irregular warfare – guerrilla warfare. This is conducted by, predominantly nonstate actors such as the Irish Republican Army, the Basque ETA, and the various Muslim organizations operating in the Middle East. In this situation the enemy lives invisibly among the people, keeping his weapons hidden until the moment he chooses to employ them, and then vanishing. Smith observes that organizations that were formed to fight industrial wars have had a hard time making the transition to fighting such irregular wars.

In his conclusion, valid until Russia's latest adventure, Smith predicts that military operations in the future will be mostly at the level of irregular warfare.

It is a useful overview of the practice of war, a good complement to John Keegan's A History of Warfare. I would recommend also Putin's Wars for readers interested in what's going on in Ukraine.

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