



RUSSIAN AGGRESSION AGAINST UKRAINE

IS A CLASSIC GREAT EUROPEAN WAR



General Rajmund Andrzejczak is interviewed by Dr. Sławomir Dębski

The date 24 February 2022 marked the start of Russia's latest aggression against Ukraine and has changed the strategic situation of Poland, as well as international politics, which also affects the area of Polish armed forces operations, for which you are responsible. Without question, the Russian aggression has also changed the character of your second tenure as Chief of the General Staff of the Polish Armed Forces. Constant changes and the ability to adapt will therefore be an obvious focus of this conversation, but before we get to that ... you are known for being an avid reader. What books have become worth reading after 24 February 2022?

Good first question.

Has any of the reading material become outdated in the face of what we are seeing on the Russian-Ukrainian front?

It might surprise you, but the obligatory reading list has not changed one bit. The character of the Russian-Ukrainian war is obviously not ordinary, especially since the war is still going on and can still have many faces. With all certainty,

there will be many interesting studies written on the subject. The nature of war, however, stays the same. It is still a political instrument, governed by the laws of politics. The classical Clausewitzian paradigm has not changed, it prevails. Russia has invaded Ukraine in order to achieve its own political agenda—to destroy Ukrainian statehood and identity. Ukraine fights to protect its state and its society against extermination, so it has its own agenda, although in Ukraine's case it is of an existential nature. The relation between classical elements of the Clausewitzian trinity, consisting of the government, the people, and the armed forces, with the reason of government, emotions of the people, and game of chance when it comes to the armed forces, is invariable, I would even call it very strongly represented during this war.

So, the political nature of this armed conflict is not surprising. Can we then say that the way in which Russia uses force and its armed forces is surprising?

First, these two should not be separated. Military instruments are clearly important, but they remain just one of many political instruments available to Russia, to which also belong political, diplomatic, energy, as well as economic measures. Why have they used military means? Why have they been used in a vacuum, without political, diplomatic, or economic support? Why was the political agenda formulated in such a way by Russian policymakers that using all the available measures at once has proved impossible? These questions will remain unanswered for now. One thing is certain—Russia made a strategic mistake when it decided to destroy the Ukrainian state and Ukrainian nation. Achieving such a goal by means other than military has proved impossible and it complicated using other means as support for the military means. Therefore, while evaluating the effectiveness of the Russian military advances against Ukraine, we cannot forget this aspect. A strategic error cannot be rectified in a tactical way. Even the best army in the world can be used in a deplorable way if you give it challenges that are beyond its reach.

Ukraine is able to defend itself thanks to political, military, and economic support given by free-

-world countries, which had previously denied it membership in key organisations. Maybe without this international support the Russian army's goals would be easier to achieve? Is it possible that this change of approach towards Ukraine surprised Russia?

The reaction of the world has surprised everyone. I think even the “free world” itself is a bit surprised that it has taken the side of Ukraine in such a decisive and effective way.

A key element of this reaction was that President Zelensky did not flee and Ukrainians have defended their country in an organised and effective way. The free world had to react. No country would support Ukraine had it surrendered. The situation on the battlefield is changing political reality.

Of course. The actions of the Ukrainian administration are very proper—it is the decisive factor. Additionally, one could think that Gen. Gerasimov had prepared the Russian armed forces for a totally different war. It is worth mentioning the sequence of events, known to every General Staff in the world. As part of our job, we analyse how armed forces are used everywhere in the world, although it is rarely mentioned in the political debate. We look for common

characteristics, similarities, and differences. In May 2021, Israel concentrated its force around the Gaza Strip. At the same time, it took over the information space and finally, in a very short time, due to precise strikes on targets in Gaza, it achieved another phase of negotiations between Israel and Palestine, in which it had the political initiative and upper hand. Thus, the superiority of Israel, resulting from its possession of advanced means of combat, effective missile defence, electronic warfare and reconnaissance allowed the use of the armed forces in order to gain a better negotiation position. I have a feeling that one of the aspects that led Russia to use military force against Ukraine was this Israeli example. Gen. Gerasimov could at least have expected a similar effect. The Ukrainians, however, are not Hamas. The ratio of forces, the advantage of geographical position, and the information advantage of Israel over Hamas were much greater than the Russian advantage over Ukraine.

The famous saying that generals prepare for wars that already happened, is an indirect warning against so-called “tunnel vision”, obscuring a wider, modern perspective and the fact that every war is different. Is the constant search

for similarities in other armed conflicts, followed by comparing the incomparable, not a dangerous trap?

When you are searching for similarities in using armed forces, there is always an element of risk, mainly that you will focus on the similarities and ignore the differences. There are, however, so many similarities between the aggression against Ukraine that the Russians are trying to achieve, and to the American operations against Iraq, like *Desert Storm* in 1991 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003, that they are difficult to ignore. Both of these previous operations inspired Russian military theoreticians. Fascinated by them was, among others, Col. Gen. Vladimir Zarudnitsky, chief of the Military Academy of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia, who, based on their example, considered usage of the armed forces as a political instrument—he was writing about his vision of war in the future, a new kind of war, long distance, with precision-guided munitions, grey-zone warfare, special units, propaganda—and this integrated use of force was supposed to pressure enemy decision-makers and the public. The Russians were imagining a new kind of war as a non-contact war. I have no doubt that on paper and during manoeuvres,

simulations, and theoretical war games, it was a very compelling vision, and it was supposed to scare Ukraine into submission, destroy morale and belief in the sense of resistance. Putin could have been convinced that the Russian army is ready to convey such a campaign to intimidate. I even believe that some Russian high-ranking commanders, when given the task of preparing their forces for the invasion of Ukraine, imagined this modern use of armed forces in order to achieve the first, and most important strategic goal, of weakening the Ukrainian will to resist, as well as “regime change”, so installing pro-Russian leadership in Kyiv, securing a better bargaining position for Russia. This failed.

Would you say that the reason for the strategic error of the Russians in the case of Ukraine could have been their tendency to compare themselves to Americans? To always copy them?

If the roots of Russian planning were inspired by the strategy in the Middle East, be it Israeli or American, they undertook their special operation having completely ignored the Ukrainian specificity or having drawn the wrong conclusions. The Ukrainians are neither Hamas, nor Saddam Hussein’s army. Ukraine in the year 2022 is also not the Ukraine of 2014. There is no language or cultural barrier, the Ukrainians know a lot about the Russian army, its mentality, and procedures, logistics and tactical habits, and



this required a different, even special approach to war planning. The Russians lacked proper experience because the Russian intervention in Nagorno-Karabakh, invasion of Georgia in 2008, annexation of Crimea, and war in Donbas in 2014 were operations on a totally different scale. That was the “limit of advance”—maximum abilities—of the Russian armed forces when it comes to securing the transfer to a different theatre, of the execution of an operational task. In fairness, the war in Ukraine is a classic military armed conflict between two countries—a great European war, using all available measures. It is also a completely unique logistic challenge. Not a quick operation, requiring support for a mere few weeks. A great war means the necessity of logistic support for the battlefield over a period of at least a year, supposing the original plan proves successful, that Kyiv would be instantly taken and a pro-Russian regime installed. Any hindrance in this kind of operation meant the automatic necessity of preparing logistic support for the Russian armed forces in Ukraine for years. For this, neither the Russian army, nor the economy is ready, not even Russian society.

Let us talk for a moment about the accuracy of these observations. Are your words analysis *ex post*, or did you know before 24 February that the Russians were approaching a cliff and intending to jump off it? There are many articles with incorrect analyses of the situation, that the information from American intelligence about Russia preparing to go to war with Ukraine was ignored in Europe. There was an article in the *Washington Post*¹ on the subject.

It is too early to divulge any details of what we knew a few months ago. I do admit that I read the article in the *Washington Post* with huge interest, as I was also involved in the process of evaluating information coming from foreign sources, and I can confirm that many situations could have looked like those described.

Were you aware, that Russia was preparing for war?

Russia is always at war, it is their normality. It has many forms, tools, instruments, political, and economic environments, but for Russia, everything is war. This particular war has been fought since 2014, which the world has forgotten

¹ Sh. Harris, K. DeYoung, I. Khurshudyan, A. Parker, L. Sly, “Road to war: U.S. struggled to convince allies, and Zelensky, of risk of invasion,” *The Washington Post*, 16 August 2022, www.washingtonpost.com.

about. We were also well aware of the fact that Putin was preparing the Russian armed forces towards using them as an instrument of political pressure, being able to, when needed, be used in combat. The Russian aggression could not have been a surprise for Poles. In the past, to tell whether a country is preparing for war, one had to observe whether tanks are loaded on trains, and before, how long and where batteries were being charged and whether they were returned to storage facilities after charging or are put into the machines. Today, however, the system indicators are much more sensitive and sublime. You need to watch the banking system, out-of-ordinary money flows, abnormal allocations and accumulation of money reserves. After the annexation of Crimea, Russians were aware that there might be new sanctions and prepared their financial system for them. We were observing these preparations. We were also observing troop movements. We saw a concentration of troops or even several of them. We were also observing ideological and propaganda preparations for war, we read Putin's article about the importance of Ukraine in Russian history and aspirations to bring back Russian and Ukrainian

unity.² We were fully aware that this "unity" could only be achieved by force. Besides, Poles are able to sense Russian intentions almost by intuition. This intuition can be blurred but it is our instinct, allowing us to sense danger before the high-tech alarm bells raise the actual alarm. Sometimes, we were unable to pinpoint the exact reason for our nervousness or give any solid proof, and yet we knew that danger was lurking somewhere near. And we were right.

We will go back to this topic later, but since you have mentioned our Polish intuition, do you think it is a result of our past trauma, or rather the specificity of the culture of our strategy, in which Russia plays a special role? After all, for the last three centuries, Polish interdependence meant mainly independence from Russia.

That would be a subject for another talk, but I will answer as follows: when in July 2018, President Andrzej Duda appointed me the Chief of Staff of Polish Armed Forces, the 100th anniversary of regaining independence by Poland was fast approaching. It was an important point of history that every Polish person should deeply consider at least once in their lifetime. As

² V. Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," *Kremlin.ru*, 12 July 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru>.

a new Chief of Staff, I was thinking about this anniversary, not only as a Pole, a patriot, but also, I felt responsible to think about it as a soldier and a Chief of Staff. In this role, performing this function, I had to answer for myself not only how you regain freedom but also why you lose it. In order to defend yourself against losing independence, you need to know the danger. In the offices of the General Staff, we spent a lot of time analysing that, we were re-examining Polish defensive wars, Polish uprisings, and both world wars that were fought on the territory of Poland. Two years later, another significant anniversary, the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Warsaw in 1920, during the war with the Bolsheviks, the Polish counter-offensive near Kock. Just after that, there was the artificial immigration crisis started by Russia and Belarus on the Polish eastern border. And it turned out that the area we knew in the General Staff from our re-examination, [which] one would think outdated and not specific, is the same area in which the Polish armed forces must operate today. Seminars about Polish wars with Russia, discussions about Polish and Russian manoeuvres, about the battles of Orsha, Kirchholm, Smolensk, Klushino, Maciejowice, Vilnius, Dębe Wielkie,

Iganie, Ostrołęka, Berezina, of Warsaw, of the Niemen River, all of these historical experiences are integrated in our contemporary challenges. Very often during visits and conversations with my colleagues, Chiefs of Staffs of other NATO countries, we discuss our responsibilities resulting from being members of NATO. Time and time again, I made them study the map of the Eastern Flank of NATO and pointed out that the area of our strategic interest starts in Moscow and leads through Smolensk, Minsk, Warsaw, as far as Berlin, Hamburg, and then again from the White Sea through Helsinki, Tallinn, Lviv, Odesa, Bucharest, as far as the Turkish Straits, Bosphorus, and Dardanelles. I explained that thinking about Russia we need to think about Berezina and swampy areas of Polesia, that we need to think about Ukraine. It is simply the same area in which Poland and other countries of Central Europe and the I Rzeczpospolita Polska have been operating for 1,000 years, and in our strategic operating area nothing is going to change. And then came 24 February 2022, and Russia attacked Ukraine. When I meet my colleagues now, I ask them: do you remember our discussions two, three years ago? And some of them get very silent, they are aware now that they had been

in a kind of a dream, that the intellectual comfort zone, which everybody was used to, caused a situation in which even having studied the same books about which you asked at the beginning, many of us could not comprehend the way in which the Russians are behaving means preparing for war. For us in Warsaw, it was obvious. Today, some of our colleagues finally understand what we had been telling them. Therefore, I would not say we were surprised, I would rather say we had not wished, internally, for our world, that we know so well, in which we are so comfortable, would again become very dangerous.

So, according to you there was no intellectual surprise. Let us get back to the *Washington Post* article. What was the reason for reserve or even scepticism in Europe towards the American warnings? Was it a lack of trust in American intelligence? Let us remember that in the past, its credibility was sacrificed for achieving political goals. Or was it that the American analysis differed from the other expertise about the condition and readiness of the Russian armed forces? Judging from the course of events so far, one could assume that with the true Russian mili-

tary potential they should have never engaged in war with Ukraine. If Europeans were wrong in their evaluation of the Russian abilities, then were they wrong along about the Russians?

First, wars begin from the first shot. Before it, you can still hope that war can be avoided. Many policymakers believed that new Russian aggression could be avoided, to the point that they started to dismiss inconvenient facts. Tunnel vision and wishful thinking are very common. Let us also not forget about the hard-to-admit strategic short-sightedness, naivety, and mistakes of Europe's energy dependence [on Russia], which is still exposed every day, inconveniently influencing the political situation of some EU countries. Second, war, and especially the results of war, are always difficult to predict. Clausewitz wrote about it, and the philosophy of war has not changed one bit. Every side in the conflict has its own vision. Neither is ever 100% ready for conflict, there is always something missing or incomplete, which, analysed separately, could lead to the conclusion that war is impossible, as nobody reasonable, aware of this deficit would venture into war. The need for military action has always been important. Those who are on the offensive side assume that taking



the strategic initiative, surprising the opponent, not only by the moment of the use of force but also by the very decision to actually use it, will determine the outcome. One could even say that in the Russian tradition there is a kind of obsession with gaining the initiative. Russian military doctrine has always valued initiative immensely. Those who are on the defensive side also have a plan and assume that they can oppose the aggression. Therefore, the nature of war has not changed—friction, fog, unpredictability, these elements. This is what the classics wrote about. The things that differentiate this

war from the classics of strategic thought is that this war is being led not only in Ukraine, not only between two countries but the war actually is fought on a global scale, either with economical means, meaning sanctions against Russia, which were imposed, or inviting Ukraine to join the European Union. These measures have been used to support the Ukrainian war effort. The goal of both sides is defeating the opponent and imposing their will on him, but Ukraine has managed to mobilise a big coalition, which does not take part in actual fighting, but indirectly is trying to pressure Russia by other

means, either by supplying Ukraine with material means, indispensable to continue the fight, or by economic pressure achieved through sanctions. The decision-making process regarding the use of political coercion measures is not only very broad, not only the governments of many countries are involved in it, but also very deep, as it involves entire societies that demand that Russia be punished for its aggression and that Ukraine is helped to fight back. Poland here is a great role model for Europe and the whole world. The combination of both military measures and economic measures, such as sanctions being used at the same time, means that the “fog of war” and the unpredictability of the outcome of the armed conflict have currently greatly increased. The war of one state against another required the amassing of a certain potential, and motivation to use military force. But it is the global extension of the war effort to the economic and social spheres that complicates pinpointing the moment or action that will determine the victory or defeat of one of the sides. It is also part of the answer to the question of why it was so difficult for some decision-makers in Europe to acknowledge that Russia may really want to destroy an entire European nation and its state. The costs

of this war will be enormous for Russia.

It is therefore possible that the aggression against Ukraine and economic sanctions imposed on Russia will be more detrimental for the country than the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and all military efforts undertaken by the Soviet Union and Russia after 1945, altogether?

It is possible. None of the classics describing the nature and character of wars has ever come upon a conglomeration of different theatres of war, and means of combat over such a huge, global area of conflict, even though there are only two countries on the battlefield. It is worth mentioning that the Russian difficulty in producing precision-guided ammunition is the result of an insufficient supply of semiconductors. The fear of sanctions is stopping their producers from filling Russian orders. It concerns all producers in the Far East, including China. The lack of components limits Russia’s ability to continue the war and increases Ukraine’s chances of conducting effective resistance. It can be compared to a modern era attack on army convoys. It is a war with global implications.

What can be considered a Ukrainian victory in the conflict with Russia?

It is a truly difficult question. The criteria for victory are immensely important. Everyone would love to know when the war will be finished. Will regaining the territories from before 2014 be a victory for Ukraine, or would it prefer to break the Russian potential and debilitate any chance for future aggression. For soldiers, the parameters of victory are not so easy to define. I have experienced these doubts when I was a planning officer in a division in Iraq and then when I was the Commander of the Polish Task Force during two tours in Afghanistan. The operation in Afghanistan was not a war in a formal or legal sense, Poland was

not at war, it was an emergency-response operation. Therefore, I am aware that for politicians, defining the criteria for using the armed forces is a very difficult, significant, and politically risky process. You must make a decision, give an order, and then receive a report from the armed forces to decide whether the completed mission has met the criteria for success or not. And it is extremely rare to get straightforward and unquestionable results. What will be the victory of Ukraine over Russia, which invaded it? It is a question for Ukrainians. We cannot answer this question for them. Ukraine is an independent country, it has every right to defend its independence, to fight for it, also to sacrifice the blood of its soldiers and the



hardship of its citizens. And it is not an easy case. Our role is to help them so that they can assess the situation and define the criteria for victory as freely as possible. That they would not be short of ammunition, equipment and fuel at the moment, so that they would not feel alone, abandoned, or betrayed, if not by their allies, then by their neighbours. This is extremely important not only for the future of Polish-Ukrainian relations but also

for the condition of the world that we will leave to future generations. A world in which armed aggression will become unprofitable because it will be opposed with solidarity and mass aid for the victim of such aggression, creating a broad informal alliance to combat an aggressor, will be a safer world. This is at stake in Ukraine, and I truly believe in Ukraine's victory.

Thank you.