

**Russian “Hybrid Warfare”: Resurgence and Politicization**

Ofer Fridman (Oxford University Press, 2022), 261 pages.

**Reviewed by Christopher Bort**

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Words have meaning. To be understood and taken seriously, we need to apply the right words to the right concepts. Otherwise, we risk becoming spreaders of misinformation, little better than, say, Russia’s President Vladimir Putin, who insists on referring to his full-scale aggression against Ukraine as a “special military operation” and insists everyone around him do the same. The field of Russia studies, and nearly everything related to Russia’s leader and his effort to settle scores with the United States and NATO in recent years, has been especially vulnerable to definitional squishiness. It doesn’t help when even self-proclaimed experts like this reviewer sometimes have trouble sorting out the distinction between, say, “misinformation” and “disinformation”—the latter being information generated with the intention to deceive.

The same ambiguity obtains with “war” and whether the things that Putin has been throwing at us over the past several years—from amplifying social divisions inside the United States by way of social media to invading Crimea with “little green men”—constitute a form of war. Are we at war with Russia? It depends on your definition of war. If so, is it a hybrid war, a gray-zone war? It depends. Critically, definitions differ between Russia and NATO, and even between NATO and the United States.

Ofer Fridman tries valiantly to sort this out in *Russian “Hybrid Warfare”: Resurgence and Politicization*, which includes, in its 2022 edition—following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine—a foreword and afterword to the 2018 edition. Fridman aims to carry out something of an insurgency of his own against “loose and lazy use of language” about so-called hybrid warfare, whereby the “strategic lexicon has been polluted by different terms that describe the same phenomenon.”

In the new foreword, Fridman contends that in light of often over-the-top rhetoric from both Russia and the West about a hybrid war between the two sides, which began with Russia’s occupation of Crimea in 2014, it should surprise no one that now, following the events of February

2022, we are in a real war. Words, then, have meaning indeed.

As the book’s subtitle implies, the concept of hybrid (or gray-zone) warfare has become politicized as Russia on one side and NATO and the United States on the other have struggled to try to understand each other’s motivations and intentions, with each side imputing hybrid or gray-zone warfare techniques to the actions of the other. Perhaps unexpectedly for the casual observer, the latest and most relevant incarnation of hybrid warfare arose not in Russia, but in the United States, where military theorist Frank Hoffman adopted the term in the mid-2000s to describe “a new tactical-operational environment” using a mix of regular and irregular forces, means, and methods.

At least, the hybrid warfare that Hoffman was describing involved actual “hot” warfare, which is a distinction that Fridman insists on. War must include actual war. By the time the Russians embraced the analogous term, *gibridnaya voyna*, in their own language years later, however, it meant something very different. It largely described informational warfare, designed to amplify social, political, and ideological divisions in an adversary’s society with the aim of weakening one’s adversary from within. If that sounds familiar, it’s because those are the techniques and motivations we in the West ascribe to Russia and its army of influence actors and useful idiots who spread divisive messages through social media, try to affect the outcome of elections, and amplify Russia’s narratives in the West. But in Russia, *gibridnaya voyna* refers to something that the United States wages against its adversaries, above all Russia (there is a separate Russian military concept, “next-generation war,” which more closely approximates Hoffman’s description of hybrid warfare).

On the way to developing *gibridnaya voyna* as a concept, Fridman writes, a series of Russian and non-Russian thinkers and theorists had been developing variations of ideas of how states undermine their enemies from within and erode their will to fight. Some of these, like the postwar theorist Evgeny Messner with his concept

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of “subversion war” and contemporary “Eurasianist” ideologue Aleksandr Dugin with “net-centric warfare,” have influenced the way Russians think about information warfare.

For many Russians, not just far-right conspiracists like Dugin but also those in the mainstream, it is an article of faith that the collapse of the Soviet Union without a shot being fired was the direct result of US-led information warfare. The Western world’s supposedly complex, well planned, and flawlessly executed recipe for the defeat of the USSR is something that contemporary Russians want very much to master and use against us.

The bad news is that, like any people who lost the last big war and never accommodated themselves to that defeat, the Russians have had a long time to think about and learn (or mis-learn) the lessons. While the United States occupied itself with a new world order, setting post-Cold War norms, and fighting terrorism or containing China, Russia was mastering the methods of *gibridnaya voyna* and gaining a temporary tactical-operational advantage over the West. The good news is that the advantage should not be overstated—the assumption that using new information warfare techniques is a guarantee of victory is like past mistaken assumptions about any new technology guaranteeing victory. It’s only a matter of time before tactical-operational gaps are bridged by the other side, Fridman assures us.

Fridman’s prescription for countering Russian information warfare is straightforward. The West needs to cultivate its own advantages—its openness and freedoms, above all—while honing its defenses, and not try to respond attack for attack. Citing George Kennan, Fridman says the West should try harder to understand Russia and not give in to fear of Russian *gibridnaya voyna*, the way an earlier Cold War generation feared a “red under every bed.” On these points, Fridman is undoubtedly correct.

In appealing for a better understanding of Russia, though, Fridman strikes what are likely to be

controversial notes. In part, he wants the West to understand how its own actions, among which are its disregard for Russia’s security interests, have driven the Russian leadership to reach for innovative, asymmetric ways to even the playing field. Resentments about the West’s supposed neglect of Russia’s interests, Fridman says, are widely shared in Russian society and are not unique to an unaccountable elite at the top. Fridman also urges that Western discourse distance itself from the recommendations of Russia experts from Central Europe, on whom he says the West overrelies. Poles, Balts, and other Central Europeans by dint of history espouse an “alarmist agenda” about Russia. They don’t understand well how the “more experienced West” won the Cold War, and would prefer that the West respond to Russian hybrid warfare tit-for-tat. He also urges the West to refrain from trying to build democracy in Ukraine and accept a role for Russia in the region.

Here, Fridman is making a realist argument echoed by John Mearsheimer—whom he approvingly cites—among others. Advocating for recognizing Russia’s security interests is not wrong, of course, but Fridman is swimming against a tide he could not entirely have foreseen. After nearly a year of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, a broad view has developed within even some of those supposedly more experienced Western nations that the “alarmist” Central Europeans had the Russian threat exactly right, and that supporting Ukraine against Russia is the only proper response.

It’s a much more naked and destructive role than one suspects Fridman, and many other observers, anticipated. It’s grossly disproportionate to any “threat” that Ukraine or probably even NATO posed, or was likely to pose, to Russia. In one respect, though, the invasion validates Fridman’s point about hybrid warfare. The concept has been politicized to the point of being meaningless. Moreover, as a form of information warfare without actual firepower to back it up, it is largely ineffective. At some point, Putin must have come to the same conclusion.



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