

Bridging the Gap between Social Sciences and Defense Studies: How the Constructivist Approach Can Enhance Practical Analysis of the Ukrainian War

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that, despite a robust interdisciplinary connection between social sciences and defense studies, a significant omission exists: the absence of social sciences in analyzing actual military operations and belligerents' capabilities during high-intensity warfare. It emphasizes the importance of constructed identities and perceptions given to adversaries and one's self-representation in relation to them. It combines an exploration of potential reasons for this absence and an exploratory theoretical constructivist framework applied to specific cases from the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. It posits that such an approach can yield more accurate assessments of belligerents' capabilities, ground realities, and enhance strategic decision-making. The analysis focuses on discourses surrounding "human wave tactics" and "combined arms", suggesting they may have been distorted by identity perceptions, affecting capability assessments. This distortion may arise from the tendency to demonize adversaries while idealizing one's own capacities. Recommendations include integrating identity analysis tools in operational assessments.

1. Introduction

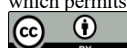
The fields of social sciences and defense studies rarely mix. Such a statement might raise a few eyebrows. Any student or researcher concerned with the field of "conflict resolution" —or "peace building" as it is more often called— would tell you that there is no shortage of such inter-disciplinary works. One just need to look at the collective book titled "Social sciences and the military: An interdisciplinary overview" (Caforio, 2006) to quickly come to the same conclusion. That is, even without taking into consideration the large corpus of works specifically dedicated to hybrid threats and wars or irregular conflicts which, at their core, combine social —if not societal— issues with security ones. The ongoing inclusion of traditionally non-military factors within security considerations is actually so prevalent that there is a raging debate about whether or not the very definition of war should be changed and expanded, with some such as Long (2012) and Schu (2017) favoring the idea while Baranets (2023) categorically refutes the notion on every premise. What this debate boils to, in essence, is whether the definition of war should become practically all encompassing with the inclusion

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of operations outside of armed confrontation itself. This is what is described in the U.S. army's most recent field operation manual (Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2022, p.ix) who unequivocally mentions in its introduction how full spectrum operations include them as an essential component for success should open conflict emerge. The goal here will not be to put this question to rest, something difficult if not impossible to do. The aim will be to show that despite this seemingly mature and even omnipresent interdisciplinary combination of social sciences and military studies, a puzzling absence manifest itself when it comes to being concerned with practical and concrete analysis of warfighting in a high-intensity context.

We are not here speaking of how the theoretical understanding and rules developed in regards to the various hybrid forms of conflict were in practice severely lacking in coherence and common agreement, such as in NATO's case (Bachmann & Gunneriusson, 2015, p.91). Neither how "hybrid challenges" were seemingly seen as the new omnipresent —almost sole— reality we would come to face (Hoffman, 2007, pp.57-58), a point which seems now particularly wrong following years of high intensity war in Ukraine. The point we are trying to raise is related to a more profound separation that seems to have taken root between the two fields. One that seems to have separated almost entirely the study of actual warfighting and concrete military operations in the context of high intensity warfare and the various analytical tools at the disposition of social sciences. More specifically, the apparent absence that the important positive role that a proper consideration for the tenants of constructivism —and especially "othering" between the active belligerents— might play in correctly reporting and assessing observations done on the field of battle or in preparation for said field.

Establishing the absence of a certain approach is always a tricky exercise as there are bound to always be, at the very least, a handful of works or mentions close to the ideas or notions presented. One might indeed find a few examples such as how it is sometimes brought up that American Hawks over-estimate Chinese military budget and capacity (Hartung, 2024). Nonetheless, as Côté and Garon (2016) correctly mention, specialized military publications have a clear tendency to leave theoretical and human elements on the wayside in favor of technological and economic variables (p.11). As such, while the issue of antagonism influencing the assessment of an enemy's capabilities is by no means some groundbreaking discovery, proper consideration or even recognition of the issue in a proper scholastic way is by no means the standard. A good illustration would be the absence of such an explicit acknowledgement in the "Handbook of Military Sciences" by Agius (2022). Although it introduces a flurry of relevant applications for constructivism related to military studies, it is definitely centered on issues of perceiving and interpreting threats in an approach that has a decisive international relations or organizational "flair" that focuses on shared proper conduct, definitions, alliances and dealing with emerging phenomena such as private military corporations (pp.9-11). As such, military sciences themselves do seem to have an implicit —if not outright explicit— separation between constructivism when applied to such concerns compared to the main topic of this work. Albeit the term separation might not be strong enough given that one aspect is simply not present.

Constructivism is indeed often used by military actors themselves, such as is the case in the short article speaking about the troubled U.S.-China relationship by Lim (2021). Nonetheless, despite being all about matters of perceptions and often deep-rooted antagonism and misunderstanding, that kind of analysis seems with great consistency to stop at the border of considering how it could impact practical assessments of actual capabilities. Perhaps the most striking recent example can be found in the completely unexpected outcome of the war in Ukraine's opening where Russia blundered spectacularly and lacked both capabilities and skills while Ukraine put up impressive resilience. Dubbed in a Center for Strategic and International Studies' report by Cohen and O'brien (2024) as an "Analytic Failure" in the title itself, this

was the natural outcome of what they described as the result of entrenched groupthink and bias in an extremely small number of experts (pp.49-50). Said experts had little to no background in actual military history and a disproportionate influence on not only public perception but also government¹ policy with lingering effects on how the actual war panned out.

This example can tell us two things. Firstly, matters of perception had completely obscured real capabilities —the authors mentions explicitly how experts had probably internalized Russian views and discourses— between a narrative of a barebones Ukrainian army and a rather fantasized big bad Russia. Secondly, it is telling that capability assessments came not from actual military analysts but from other sources. When both are considered simultaneously it depicts a bleak picture where not only matters of perception are disruptive and ignored in actual analysis, said military analysis are not even coming from militaries themselves. Arguably, even if they did, they would have certainly suffered from related issues but it puts a spotlight on the greater limitations that seems to plague capability assessments as a whole. Finally, it could be argued that the specific case of over-estimating Russia runs counter to this work's overall argumentation. However, while it is definitely concerned with the potential for under-estimating an enemy, such a tendency most certainly has to be understood as the other side of the same coin. One simply has to remember how Napoleon was simultaneously depicted as both a buffoon and the greatest menace the British Empire had ever seen to be convinced of such. Furthermore, the shock of “how wrong” we were may also have played a role in ensuring that this “renewed” perception of an incompetent Russia stayed around longer than necessary. Overall, the cases that will be addressed in this paper do seem to indicate that proper examination for the issue of identity's impact on assessments were not properly considered despite the extremely high profile and importance of the Ukrainian conflict; even after such egregious mistakes initially.

In order to explain the issue at hand and illustrate how its resolution might be a valuable addition to both the field of defense studies and sociology, this work's layout will be as follow. Firstly, the methodology used will be addressed. Secondly, an introduction to a basic understanding of what is meant by “constructivism” and how it is of relevance are presented. Thirdly, a brief tentative exploration of how the distance between the fields might have come to be in the specific context that interests us. Fourthly, potential examples where the lack of consideration for othering might have played a role in “wrongly” —for a lack of a better term— predicting and assessing the nature of current war and warfare with an emphasis on the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. More precisely, how the treatment that the notion of “human wave tactics” and “combined arms” received might have negatively influenced predictions. Finally, a conclusion followed by a general discussion about potential future research and recommendations will be made.

2. Methodology

A vital precision about this work is that it does not aim at being an extensive constructivist analysis of the opposing sides in Ukraine. Such an undertaking would be beyond the scope of this current paper. The objective is to produce a mostly exploratory work addressing the reasons behind the lack of considerations for the kind of analysis mentioned in relation to defense studies and how such an inclusion could actually be beneficial. Similarly, the actual constructivist lens that will be applied might seem, at first glance, superficial in practice outside of introducing what might be relevant starting goals and broad considerations for the notions of “othering” and identities constructed in opposition. It might be said that this contribution will be more related to the field of defense studies than it is to social sciences. Nonetheless, it

¹ And thus, by extension, military policy.

might naturally seem to a military analyst that constructivism is unrelated to his field in the case that interests us; actual or potential high-intensity war. In addition, it is, in practice, the reality of the topic, such analysis are *de facto* absent. As such, a greater emphasis was put on the cases addressed from a defense studies' point of view rather than on an intricate constructivist approach, especially given the issue of space in relation to the complex issues addressed. Given the background and realities one has to contend with regarding the topic, it follows that such an approach seemed preferable.

With those important points out of the way, the methodology and approach that will be used are as follow. Firstly, as already mentioned multiple times, this work is highly exploratory in nature. As the section dedicated to the potential explanation for the divide between the fields will explain; when it comes to the topic of war, both fields are actually ripe with issues. This might seem surprising given that war is essentially the very subject of defense studies. However, war is a complicated topic even for his dedicated field. Social sciences also has a complex —if not sometimes problematic— relationship with the subject. An attempt at strengthening interdisciplinary links between the two, when they already have limits on their own and for a specific approach that is, essentially, absent can hardly be anything but. As such, the methodology is an exploratory application of a theoretical constructivist framework dedicated to introducing the broad lines of how identity issues may have been crucial —but apparently ignored— variables which led to incorrect assessment or, at the very least, did not make actual analysis any easier.

Secondly, the analysis is definitely qualitative with a focus on two particular cases: the discourses surrounding “human wave tactics” and “combined arms”. Wars, by their very nature, are chaotic and hard to analyze, especially ongoing ones. It is, to put it bluntly, impossible to be completely exhaustive and the subject is ill suited for a quantitative analysis; even more so when considering constructivist notions. Nonetheless, those two high profile cases seemed illustrative and relevant enough to provide a solid foundation. The justification for those two examples has to be found in the former encapsulating perfectly the reification of both an adversary and its capabilities/practices as worse than they probably are for reasons related to constructed and perceived identities. Identities that, in this case, probably have roots stretching back to decades ago due to an already antagonistic shared history. The justification regarding the latter case is that it serves both as a logical extension of the first, but also as a more concrete illustration of the potential tendency for constructing oneself an identity that is superior on the foundation and reversal of the negative traits given to an adversary. In both cases, there are also strong indications that given identities could be central in explaining major miscalculations and, as such, their choice is not anodyne.

What this work being exploratory and qualitative means in practice is that our framework and research objective will take a specific form. Our methodological framework will follow a step-by-step approach. It will firstly consist of a general broad introduction to constructivism's main tenants and what specific approach and strand of it might be the most relevant. The goal being to show that it has a role in our specific case beyond its already used general applications. Then, the troubled relationship between not only the fields of social sciences and defense studies but also between said fields and the very topic of practical analysis of war is discussed. The choice to explain the potential divide between the fields before actually attempting to demonstrate it in practice is deliberate. It will serve as not only the necessary context and justification for the whole analysis but further our goal of establishing and explaining why and how the omission we mentioned might be present in the first place. What follows is the main core of our work, which is centered on the two cases mentioned. The goal here being to provide a limited but nonetheless concrete illustration of the absence we mentioned and how it may have negatively impacted analysis. As such, this work's research goal is clearly to introduce an issue that is

little spoken about and attempt to give relevant illustrations of its presence and following impact while providing exploratory solutions and theoretical tools to address it.

Finally, regarding the topic of sources used, it is central to mention that they are by no means exhaustive and do not constitute the final word on the subject. In the publications and media frenzy that surrounds this specific conflict it could hardly be otherwise. If not exhaustive, they are nonetheless rather eclectic and an attempt at incorporating a large array of points of origin has been made between news publications, reports, articles and official statements.

3. The Relevance of Constructivism

Let us first begin by defining what we actually mean here when we speak of constructivism. Its basic main points according to Wendt are as follows: “the structure of human association is determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces” and “the identities and interests of purposive actors are constructed by these shared ideas rather than given by nature” (Wendt, 2001/1999, p.1). An actual definition given by Shannon is “Constructivism is a social perspective arguing that agents and structures co-construct each other and that ideational factors and intersubjective meaning matter” (Shannon, 2012, p.12). He follows by adding that “Onuf describes it as a continuous two-way process in that humans ‘make the world what it is’ while ‘social relations make or construct us’” (*Ibidem*). One would notice that those authors mentioned are firmly set within the realm of international relations. It seems likely that, in accordance with the notion of reciprocity in war and the Clausewitzian lesson that “war is the continuation of policy by other means” it is particularly relevant to use definitions coming from that specific field of human sciences. Conventional high intensity war and warfare happens between States or between entities that, *de facto*, have enough resources to operate or be considered as such; nonobsting semantical debates about their recognition or the finer ontological controversy surrounding the term itself.

Why constructivism might be highly relevant is because war is a quintessentially human activity:

“[it] is the name given to the interaction of two organized groups [...] The violent confrontation of armies is only the military dimension of that interaction. It is included in war, but war is the global, social, and political framework within which the violent confrontation of armies takes place. To put it more simply, one should think of war not as the violent confrontation itself, but as the context for that confrontation.” (Schu, 2017, p.307)

Furthermore, the link between conflict at large and constructivism may seem obvious. For example, regarding the case of the war in Ukraine itself, Hayat (2022) analyzed how their collective identities, with deep historical roots, “transcended into a total war” (p.29). Animosity and belligerence is likely, if not destined, to become related to identity issues. Of course, one should be careful to not put too much emphasis on the ideational aspect of constructivist analysis when applying it to something as concrete as actual war fighting. One side might consider itself more combat ready and more technologically advanced because it simply is.

In addition, we are not here considering the relevance of constructivism to measure abstract — but still definitely military relevant— notions like the moral resilience or will to fight of a society or an army. A topic that has seen a resurgence lately (McNerney et al., 2018). Despite this warning about paying attention to material facts, we are here indeed speaking about the question of how sides perceives not only themselves but also their opposition. Direct observations of conflicts are the only true litmus test for gauging the current and expected nature of war; and those are by no means easy between the fog of war, secret defense and an

entire pharmacopeia of barriers to observations. Compelling those, are the fact that wars are the most politically charged events one can imagine. The reality on the field, being already hard to decipher, is thus even more obscured by identity factors where each side not only constructs and give their opponent a certain identity—and thus capabilities related to it—, but often also constructs their own in relation to said given identity.

The concept of identity is of course one that is intensely debated and challenged to the point it is often derided as existing in a state of “definitional anarchy”, including in the field of social sciences itself (Hagström & Gustafsson, 2014, pp.2-3). To solve that issue and focus on what has just been said regarding constructed identities and their assorted capabilities, the relational approach where “a ‘relational’ understanding where demarcations between domestic and international, identity and difference, or Self and Other are exactly what constitute identity” (p.4) seems appropriate. Such an approach, applied to concrete cases where realities on the ground have been ill assessed or predicted could give us reasons, even partial ones, as to why it has been the case.

4. Explanation and Tentative Justification of the Distance between the Fields

It will surprise no one to mention that, intellectually speaking, the military field is one deeply grounded in practicality. Its aim and purpose being primarily to establish working doctrines and disseminate said doctrines within a fighting force. How well it manages to do so is another debate. There is recurring criticism over its lack of scientific thinking in general, precisely due to said practicality (Fox, 2024 ; Voelz, 2014, pp.89-90). Similarly, there is the extremely contested and fuzzy nature of some of its most central doctrinal and philosophical approaches (Tuck, 2023, p.25 ; Echevarria, 2003, p.108) or, as mentioned in our introduction, how technology and budgetary concerns are detrimental to other aspects. As far back as 1995, the relationship between philosophy, science and military science proper (Pellegrini, 1995) indeed seemed incredibly complicated and in flux. The point here is not to disparage military and defense studies while putting the field of sociology on a pedestal. The latter certainly has its fair share of issues and debates, especially when it comes to the topic of war. The two main school of thought when it comes to contemporary war saw it as bound to become non-conventional and overall less deadly (Malešević, 2014, pp.66-70, 82-83). Furthermore, it was seen either as a parasitic phenomenon solely resulting from the ailments of neo-liberal economics or as the lingering threshing of a past and less civilized world. All those points are definitely reductionist and lack in their appreciation for the wider context of geopolitics. In any case, they seem particularly anachronistic today. The point here is to put the emphasis on the fact that both fields are radically different in their outlook and goals. That the practical minded theorist of war does not feel particularly interested in the highly theoretical—if not abstract—finer details of sociology makes sense. That the two fields might actually even be “antagonistic” to a degree is also a real possibility. Human sciences are today, with little doubt, overwhelmingly liberal (Langbert, Quain & Klein, 2016) and sociology specifically has been for decades (Horowitz, 1993). It is not impossible that some implicit animosity is still present; as it already did half a century ago when U.S. academics saw everything related to national interest as reeking of “corruption and evil” while the opposing side saw sociology as the work of “communists” or, at the very least, “impudents” (Shimkin, 1977, p.47).

Another potential reason for the chasm between defense studies—when understood more specifically as related to the actual study of warfare, or rather “combat”, in practice—and social sciences is that, bluntly speaking, the latter were never concerned with the totality of war as a concrete phenomenon. When, in 1967, an expanded role for social sciences was urged in terms of defense, it was explicitly mentioned as the result of the need to wage “peacefare” too

(Greenberg, 1967, p.886). It can also be seen in the collective book edited by Caforio (2006) mentioned in the introduction with a simple glance at the actual topics addressed in each chapter. Most specifically in chapter 2 (Segal, 2007, pp.55-60) where the “current state of knowledge” can be seen as being centered on a plethora of notions such as humanitarian aid and peacekeeping but also things such as gender and family issues within the troop, amongst other things. It is not to say that such research does not have its place or that we should expect sociologists to concern themselves with the proper maintenance and use of a heavy mortar. Such topics are definitely relevant in order to organize and manage a military force. Furthermore, the whole point of an inter-disciplinary approach is precisely to explore issues a field might have not thought of or is not necessarily equipped to address on its own. The issues lies, in our opinion, in the fact that, while those topics might be seen as definitely “war-adjacent”, they are not concerned—or only very tangentially—to war when understood in the very Clausewitzian sense. That is, as a reciprocal massive physical confrontation with high lethality. This, indeed, is not the sole kind of war. However, due to its arguably greater consequences than the others, it is the one we are mostly concerned with here; especially given how it seemed to have been left on the wayside recently.

This whole issue might also be related to the inescapable ebb and flow of history and geopolitics. For example, it is interesting to note that the most recent French doctrinal paper (Centre de doctrine et d'enseignement du commandement de l'Armée de Terre, 2022, pp.15, 18-19, 50) is probably one of the most outspoken when it comes to the supposed solidity of the “timeless principles of war” despite the existence of hybrid or unconventional warfare. Especially when past publications (Centre de doctrine d'emploi des forces, 2007 ; Centre de doctrine et d'enseignement du commandement de l'Armée de Terre, 2021, pp.14-15) were unequivocal when it came to the fact that a profound change was occurring. As such, depending on the type and nature of conflicts currently ongoing, social sciences might be unceremoniously deemed not relevant anymore, which leads to an unstable environment where such “irrelevancy” might actually go beyond the actual limitation of their applicability. Lastly, and probably the most important element to consider, is that wars and conflicts are not a fertile ground for level-headed and objective analysis of the sociological kind. This will be explored further in the next section but it is relevant to mention that, if there was only one factor to consider that might push the two fields apart, it is certainly this one.

5. Reification, Obfuscation and Blame-Shifting: How Assigning an Identity to One's Adversary Can Lead to Disaster

Before we begin our investigation, it is important to mention again that this analysis is by no means the final word on the topic; neither does it claim to be. Wars, especially ongoing ones, are, again, extremely difficult to analyze. The point is rather to take examples where initial assumptions have been proven wrong in practice and, through a constructivist relational lens, provide an explanation as to why and how matters of identity constructions might have played a central role in that state of affairs. With that being said, the topics we will address are as follow and fall mainly under the category of identity constructed in opposition where anything Western has been reified as superior and anything Russian as inferior. Evidently, the points we will address are not clearly demarcated and constantly interact with each other. Furthermore, the issue is vaster than those specific examples. Nonetheless, those are the main ones we will consider as they constitute a good and already large enough introduction.

It is good to start by mentioning once more the well-known fact that objectivity and war do not mix well. The enemy is often, if not systematically, pictured in a dehumanizing way that, quite naturally, might influence how his actual capabilities and methods on the ground are estimated

but also evaluated. In the case of Russia, the public discourse of its opponents have been less than flattering; even if often for valid reasons. Nonetheless, the dehumanizing discourse—including from Ukrainian official State channels—comparing Russian troops to orcish hordes from the lord of the rings (Mirovalev, 2022 ; Li, 2023) are probably taking things too far. Outside the potential to hurt their very cause—it should not be forgotten that Russia does practice conscription, sometimes forced—it is easy to imagine how such a parallel might impact how it is imagined that the Russian army actually functions as a fighting force and under-estimate it. Seemingly, it is precisely what happened when it comes to the supposed use of “human wave tactics” both in mainstream and specialized publications. In a Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies report, Watling & Reynolds (2023) use an array of news and comments to support rather ambiguously the notion that it is a reality on the ground (p.4). This is problematic as they themselves mention that they are actually fundamentally different; being extremely low density with small teams of two to five men with a maximum of five teams, with generally only one or two advancing into contact. They are, in essence, a form of continuous reconnaissance with limited scope (p.5). Another issue is also the nature of those news and comments mentioned. The news article by Kluth (2023) cannot be described as anything else than an extremely charged opinion piece that has also been used as a basis for an article by Yanchik (2023) for the Atlantic Council think tank—which Watling & Reynolds also mention—and suffers from similar gross oversimplifications.

Such problematic reporting, however, is to be expected despite small assault detachments not being anything new. WWII soviet doctrines is showing striking similarities to the tactics employed in Ukraine (Knight, 2020) and have, through time, become reified into something else entirely. Schwartz (2021) cleverly explained how historical and cultural factors after WWII—majorly the East/West opposition—led to the reification and caricature of soviet deep battle doctrine and shock troops as the quasi barbaric use of human waves while German doctrines was praised (pp.26-30). Similarly, the modern psyche pictures the Chinese human wave tactics of the Korean War. Nonetheless, those are largely the result of exaggerated reports of shocked soldiers even more amplified by the press, despite being actually close to the use of “traditional” shock troops at the platoon size (History Division of the United States Marine Corps, 2007, p.256). That is not to say that current Russian tactics do not lead to terrible loss of life. They do use “disposable infantry” from various sources to probe defense during those limited forays (Watling & Reynolds, 2023, pp.3-5) and while Chinese troops were made of veterans (History Division of the United States Marine Corps, 2007, p.256) those are certainly not. However, they also certainly do not constitute the majority or even a large bulk of such attacks.

As such this specific issue has probable roots that date back to almost a century ago and are linked to the reified identity of the larger “communist menace” as this barbaric other that has little to no consideration for human life. Russia being the direct successor State of the USSR—which in addition and, to be blunt, has never successfully shaken off this image of being a traditional enemy—and its recent history of military violence and blunders—for example in Chechnya—certainly did not help in dispelling assumptions. Its consistent categorization as a “near-peer” competitor alongside China for much of the past decade also probably did not help due to the apparent thematic “continuity” it provided. However, despite Russia’s abysmal displays at the onset of the conflict and its certainly real tendencies for brutal and uncaring practices, how it is perceived has probably went past the recognition of some of its real traits and into the realm of exaggeration and outright reification.

By picturing one adversary has akin to a pillaging disorderly horde only good at throwing around its mass, the larger picture is obscured. The implicit but obvious message is that such practices are not only “bad” and/or “evil” but also simply unsustainable. That their losses were

certainly appalling leaves no doubt. Albeit, how sustainable or not military losses and expenses are in general is another whole can of worms in the contemporary era where large-scale industrial conflicts have been practically unheard of for decades upon decades. This complex issue in itself becomes almost impossible to consider realistically when the underlying assumption is that the enemy is wasting his men as a standard practice. Not so long ago Russian's losses were seen as unsustainable and "pyrrhic" at best (Drennan, 2023). Today, the reality Ukraine is facing is one where they are the one suffering from crippling manpower issues, low morale and desertion (Kass, 2024) while Russia exploits it to seek breakthroughs (Spirlet, 2024). Judging by the current slow but seemingly accelerating erosion of Ukrainian lines in the Donbass region, assumptions about this barbaric and wasteful other seemed clearly off.

The other side of this equation when the enemy is seen as this barbaric other is that, almost naturally, oneself can become perceived as not only morally but simply superior—and more refined—in general. This is especially apparent in the discourse predating the then greatly anticipated 2023 Ukrainian counter-offensive and especially the modern "American way" of fighting as opposed to what was perceived as the Russian inferior old way of doing so. Rather grandiose discourses about Ukrainian columns about to go "thundering" almost unopposed through Russian defenses just as the U.S. did in Irak (Axe, 2023a) were very quickly followed by extremely pessimistic statements (Axe, 2023b). Similarly, once it became clear that things were not going as planned, the Ukrainian troops formerly lauded for their innovativeness, skill, good morale and excellent Western tactics (Jones, Palmer & Bermudez, 2023)² were almost instantly characterized as still suffering from the ailments of a former soviet force and as not capable of conducting modern operations due to a lack of training (Beebe & Webb, 2023 ; Schmitt, Barnes, Cooper & Gibbons-Neff, 2023).

What followed in these reports alongside others (Jake, Kramer & Schmitt, 2023 ; Schmitt & Cooper, 2023 ; Ryan, Khurshudyan & Birnbaum, 2023 ; Cullen, 2023 ; Caddle, 2023) can only be described as a gigantic cacophony where it is not even clear to what extent Ukraine applied Western tactics—if it did—in addition to large amounts of blame-shifting, including between Ukraine and the West. Whether or not this counter-offensive could have ultimately worked it beyond the scope of this current analysis. It was, in all cases, probably extremely optimistic—if not bordering on wishful thinking—to expect great success of the magnitude anticipated given the extent of Russian preparations and the limitations of the Ukrainian army but the point is not there. The point is that analyzing the likelihood of success or even the feasibility of the operation was compromised from the start given how both side were reified as respectively more and less ready than they really were with little doubt that partisan thinking centered upon one's identity played a huge role in that. It is notable that it was not limited to simply the global media and press, where such partisanship can be expected. Think tanks such as The Atlantic Council and The Center for Strategic and International Studies³ and, judging by the surprised reaction of both Ukraine and the U.S., even States and militaries clearly over-estimated Ukraine's capabilities. Perhaps the most striking example of the latter being the declarations of the chief of Estonia's Military Intelligence. Stating that Ukraine was on the verge of a "major breakthrough" (The Telegraph, 2023) and "close to success of a larger sort" (ERR, 2023) at a date where it had become obvious to everyone, including the Ukrainian, that the counter-offensive had already stalled and failed.

² It is also interesting to mention that an extremely large emphasis on the WWII German-inspired "Auftragstaktik" of the Ukrainians—alongside some rather puzzling parallels with the Blitzkrieg in France, not in the East, where it failed rather spectacularly—is made in this analysis. The emphasis on German experience mentioned by Schwartz (2021) thus seems to be truly alive and well.

³ See : Hooker, 2023 ; Jones, Palmer & Bermudez, 2023

This misrepresentation clearly extended to the idea of combined arms, the “modern” and “proper” Western way of fighting war often presented —sometimes almost verbatim in this fashion— as opposed to the old attritional style used by others, more specifically Russia.⁴ For example, the article by Axe (2023a) about small columns penetrating deep and on their own deep into enemy territory is a gross misunderstanding of what Western military officials actually recommend. A definition that seemed to spread in the press was the following: “[the] coordinated maneuvers by large groups of tanks, armored vehicles, infantry, engineers, artillery and, *sometimes*, air power.” (Ryan, Khurshudyan & Birnbaum, 2023). However, this definition is also incorrect. While combined arms, as most terms used in military jargon, is actually far from precise; the definition used in the U.S. doctrine is as follow: “the synchronized and simultaneous application of arms to achieve an effect greater than if each element was used separately or sequentially” (Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2019c, chapter 3, p.9). Nonetheless, there are absolutely no doubt whatsoever that air power is a quintessential part of it as understood by Western military practices (Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2022, chapter 3, p.9 ; Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2019a, chapter 2, p.3 ; Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2019b, chapter 3, p.10 ; Joints Chiefs of Staff, 2014, p.xi ; Joints Chiefs of Staff, 2019, chapter 1, p.1). In addition, Russia obviously *does* use combined arms. The so criticized and reified Russian way of conducting assault, in a captured field manual, could even actually be described as how to “engage in coordinated combined arms operation on small organizational levels” (Czub, 2023). It might at the time have done so only partially and far from perfectly; but following revision after early struggles, it did use combined arms and often with competency (Watling & Reynolds, 2023, pp.2, 10, 24).⁵ Furthermore, even a medieval army combining spearmen with archers was technically engaging in combined arms warfare, just as any “old” attritional method of fighting that is not simply throwing pure infantry at trenches would.

The war in Ukraine can indeed be seen as a specific case where, for contextual reasons, both sides struggled —and often still do— to use their air force in any meaningful way. Nonetheless, a definition of “Western” combined arms that clearly ignores a vital component of it —and which may have its origin in trying to preserve the constructed superior identity of one’s side in opposition to the other— can only be detrimental to actual operations. Case in hand, a lack of gifted aerial assets was specifically one of the blames put on its Western backers by Ukraine in the rebuking game we mentioned, it simply did not have the air force necessary. How actually widespread such a misconception was is hard to tell obviously. However, when in addition, a widespread discourse about the opponent being almost naturally brutish and outdated —let us not forget the craze in the media about supposed senseless assault conducted only with shovels at Bakhmut (Kuepper, 2023)— how a cumulative obscuring effect can take place is easy to imagine. Not only in terms of assessing the enemy or the reality on the ground but also the theoretical framework used to do so, especially when it comes a term as vague as “combined arms”.

6. Conclusion, Further Research and Recommendations

This work indeed has to be seen as a very early foray into the subject of identity perception of an enemy in relation to oneself and how it could be applied to the concrete analysis —but also maybe the actual planning— of operations. It might seem overly simplistic at first glance. After

⁴ See: Schmitt & Cooper, 2023 ; Beebe & Webb, 2023 ; Ryan, Khurshudyan, & Birnbaum, 2023

⁵ If the current issues encountered by Ukrainian defenses and the now daily footage of FABs delivered by planes hitting their positions are of any indication, it seems that Russia has successfully managed to reform almost completely. Another element that is then to be taken into account is how the negative perception of an enemy might make it harder to imagine them ongoing successful reforms.

all, simply stating that one tends to demonize an adversary while also exaggerating one's own qualities in reaction to said demonizing does not seem to be worthy of academic considerations. However, such an essential and basic point seems to have been vastly forgotten once more in the face of the extremely emotional event that a war is. Additionally, the concept being actually simple or even "simplistic" does not preclude giving it proper attention; especially when its omission can have great consequences. As seen, a potential underestimation of Russia's capabilities and an overestimation of Ukraine's does seem to be present and has led to wrong assessments or, at the very least, did not help in correctly gauging and estimating realities on the ground to the point that even military concepts themselves might have become "tweaked" to fit the larger narrative.

What we found in practice is that, despite already having been burned out by analytical failure pertaining to assessing capabilities at the onset of the conflict—in no small part due to reified identities—the same phenomenon seems to have manifested once again. In addition, in relation to the same conflict. Albeit, in a "reverse" fashion. The implications are vast. What it means is that not only proper consideration for the approach advocated in this paper was not given; the issue actually seems to be quite resilient. Even worse, it might indicate that a tendency might exist for over-correction in the sense that a flawed analysis, once corrected, might in turn itself become reified and not questioned. Another finding is that all those inclinations could be considered quite natural given the fields that consider the larger topic. Social sciences and defense studies not only have a difficult relationship between themselves but also—which might be more surprising regarding defense studies—with actual concrete analysis of war. More specifically, although constructivism and even social sciences in general have a solid joint history with the military field, the issue of othering and identity perception influencing capability assessments is, to put it bluntly, simply absent for the latter. Given the tentative findings of this work, this issue is apparently here to stay. At least, unless some difficult soul searching and an expanded role for social sciences is once again advocated in the same fashion it was decades ago for different reasons. A recommendation would thus be to promote as soon as possible for such an inclusion, even if only at an embryonic state. Military reports and works are indeed practically minded and aim for a certain kind of factuality, however, any sociologist or political scientist will tell you that perfect neutrality does not exist when it comes to human activity and war is quintessentially human.

Regarding the limitations of this paper, it has limited itself in its constructivist analysis outside of broad exploratory lines. Similarly, it could have also explored in further details the whole issue of how Western equipment was almost seen as consisting of wonder-weapons or as perfect "game-changers" despite their extremely limited numbers. Let us just say that when news of their utter destruction in a fashion similar to old soviet ones started to arrive, a certain aura of invincibility built after decades of superiority in contingency wars was certainly weakened. This topic is, to our knowledge, largely unstudied and would be deserving of further research. One just has to think about how the Bradley—still a respectable and efficient vehicle nonetheless—was described in absolutely glowing praise (Jake, Kramer & Schmitt, 2023) despite its otherwise troubled history of development issues (Roblin, 2019, 2020); some in direct opposition to his presented qualities. The same could be said when it comes to the delivery of F-16s, touted and wanted for years whereas the silence seems now deafening—despite some being finally delivered—due to their extremely limited impact. Another point would be the study of how Russia's reification of the American way of war as this almost fantasized form of hybrid warfare with little to no actual fighting led to the absolute disaster that was their early entry into Ukraine and which has, seemingly, only been addressed extensively by Minic (2023, pp. 137, 337, 376-377, 342-343). A fascinating topic that seems

tailor-made for the relational approach given how it seems grounded in both rejection and emulation of an “other” seen as both antagonistic and superior.

In addition, outside of those adjacent examples, actual more in-depth research not only regarding the war in Ukraine but also generalized to other conflicts needs to be done to actually refine the potential link between othering, identity and assessments of capabilities be it during or prior to actual conflicts. The inclusion of already concluded ones would not only — partially— solves the issue of potential or probable bias and give a greater access to sources now that dust has settled, it would also help in generalizing the finding beyond a specific war in particular. One last but relevant recommendation would be to also keep in mind that, despite our earlier recommendation, military publications being practically oriented is by no means a flaw. As briefly mentioned, war is a concrete activity with even more concrete consequences. One should be careful to not overemphasize variables related to perception and question every single assessment made, densifying the fog of war. Some modicum of “decisiveness” or even “arbitrariness” is necessary. A careful balance between arresting one’s opinion and recognizing that said opinion might be biased needs to be found and considering constructivism in such assessment might be an important key to do so. Gauging one’s own capacities and their use against an adversary is one thing, truly interiorizing at the onset that perception bias might exist —especially given the practical minded focus of such analysis— is another. For example for all the talk by the U.S. navy in relation to China about how no one has more experience in “joint warfighting ecosystems” (Franchetti, 2024, p.iii) or how wargame analysis (M. F. Cancian, M. Cancian & Heginbotham, 2023, p.74) put a great emphasis on the superior U.S. practical experience due to WWII; the last major naval engagement of the U.S. against a peer enemy was indeed almost a century ago.

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