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Attrition - The Uncomfortable Reality of War and its Neglect in Contemporary Western Military Thought

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RESEARCH REPORT

Introduction

Many wars in history began with the assumption that a swift, decisive attack would lead to a victory without great cost to the aggressor. In the vast majority of cases, these assumptions have been wrong (Murray, 2023, p. 495). The Russian 'Special Military Operation' in Ukraine was supposed to last three days, and the resulting war has now lasted more than three years. It follows in the footsteps of a myriad of devastating, drawn-out wars of attrition, in which no quick battlefield victory was achieved at the beginning. Quickly-resolved wars in modern history, such as the German Wars of Unification or the Gulf War, are exceptions to the rule, creating an illusion of the possibility of replicable, swift victories. The historical trend, however, has always been that wars turn out to go on for far longer and be more devastating than expected for the aggressor. The assumption that one's forces will be superior, able to surprise and act faster and deadlier than the enemy, has led to innumerable strategic blunders, deciding the fates of leaders and empires. Nevertheless, the intrigue of this detrimental idea persists.

One form in which this idea seemingly persists is within the doctrines and strategy of Western militaries and NATO allies (Verhaeghe, 2024). The dominant tendency there is to focus on the idea of manoeuvre warfare which supposes that, in the case of military confrontation with an adversary such as Russia, Western forces can use their technological advantage and superior tactics to deliver devastating blows that would quickly incapacitate the enemy. However, this assumption is, at best, optimistic and, at worst, extremely dangerous. In the current Russo-Ukrainian War, we can observe a situation where neither the force being supplied with Western weaponry and support, nor the opposing Russian side, have had any success in applying such tactics. It is a war which, like so many others before, after the failure of either side to achieve a quick victory, has developed into a war where attrition is a key part of both sides' efforts (Watling & Reynolds, 2025).

While it is impossible to predict how a potential Russian attack on Europe would look like, whether it comes to technology, terrain, or human circumstances, the strong likelihood must be considered that, even given the complete readiness of European armies at the outset, it would not be thwarted quickly even with the supposed superiority of such Western tactics, but rather also turn into a longer, grinding war in which objectives can only be achieved piecemeal. Currently, neither the EU Member States, nor the NATO allies, including the US, would be prepared for such a scenario in terms of doctrine, societal readiness, or industrial production (Meyer zum Felde, 2024). Seeing how far Russia is prepared to exhaust itself in Ukraine, it is necessary to adjust our mindset to such a potential future war, already purely to effectively deter the Russians, so that a war may never take place, and, in the horrible reality that it does, to avoid being caught unprepared.

This paper will argue that, due to both historical precedent and current realities in warfare,

the attritional element of war is neglected in the military and political thinking of Europe and its allies. To do so, it will explore the reasons why attritional war is likely to occur, and why the assumption of a quick, decisive victory is precarious. Furthermore, it will examine the debate and misconceptions about attritional versus manoeuvre warfare, including in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war and, finally, it will place this analysis in the context of the current European and Western military preparedness.

2. Types and Use Cases of Military UAVs

In modern history, long and protracted wars have been far more frequent than quick, decisive ones (Murray, 2023, p. 495). There are certain wars that, due to the specific circumstances in which they occurred, did indeed take the form of the latter. For example, the German Wars of Unification reinforced this idea, overshadowing the gruesome attritional nature of the American Civil War, which occurred during the same period. The consequence, however, ultimately culminated in the infamous assumption, widely shared in Europe at the time, when the great powers entered into the First World War in the summer of 1914, that the war would be decided quickly (Murray, 2023, p. 499-512). Instead, this war developed into the archetypal war of attrition due to the unexpected impact of advancements in military technology, shaping our understanding of the phenomenon of modern, industrialized, attritional war to this day. Ultimately, the defeat of the Central Powers came about through the superiority of the Allied industrial base, and their adaptation to the tactics and strategies suited for this type of warfare (Rose, 2023).

Similarly, the notable German victories at the beginning of the Second World War heavily depended on specific circumstances, and soon after the war developed into a longer attritional phase that was ultimately decided by the vastly superior industrial power of the Allies, especially of the US. The Korean War, the last time the US armed forces were faced with a conventional defence in depth, came to be fought in much the same manner once the initial phases of movement ended, leading the US to employ an attritional approach again (Rose, 2023). A more recent example, the Gulf War gives the impression of a war that was won through a quick, decisive victory, appearing to support the superiority of the American manoeuvre doctrine. However, the long, protracted insurgencies after the Iraq War and the intervention in Afghanistan demonstrate that wars still tend to develop in unexpected directions, go on far longer, and turn more attritional than expected, even after initial successes. Therefore, one should be careful not to draw the wrong lessons from the Gulf War's brevity (Lacquement, 2020; Greenberg, 2020). There is no reason to believe that a potential conflict between NATO and Russia, or between Europe and Russia without American involvement, would be any quicker or easier than any of these examples, yet current Western doctrines do not seem to properly acknowledge this fact.

3. The Ideas of Manoeuvre and Attrition: A False Dichotomy

The debate between attritional warfare and manoeuvre warfare is controversial among military thinkers, but also conceptually misleading. In fact, it is altogether inappropriate to speak of attrition *warfare*, in the sense that attrition is not actually a way of warfare, with a guiding doctrine and developed strategic thought, as much as attrition is a process that is inherent to warfare. Rather, attrition should be seen as a characterisation of warfare, concentrated on the reduction and destruction of enemy military equipment and personnel (Fox, 2024). Nevertheless, a debate and rhetorically-constructed dichotomy between attrition and manoeuvre persists, both at the level of individual authors and entire military doctrines. Even NATO's own doctrinal publications struggle to properly define manoeuvre warfare, fail to define attrition warfare as anything other than just the opposite of manoeuvre, and hubristically assert the inherent superiority of manoeuvre (Verhaeghe, 2024). Both manoeuvre and attrition are part of war, occur simultaneously, and are not inherently contradictory (Rose, 2023; Bonci & Riggi, 2025). It is therefore important to keep in mind that, rather than arguing for a strategy or doctrine of attrition, this paper aims to advocate for the awareness, consideration of, and preparation for attrition in European military thinking.

Within the debate, two important strands can be identified. One side argues in favour of the superiority of manoeuvre and current doctrinal conceptions, due to Western technological prowess and the belief of this being the best-suited model for the strengths of Western, democratic societies, with decisive power on the battlefield (Garrett & Hoffman, 2023; Walshe, 2025). The other side argues that attrition is inherent to warfare, and that these assumptions are hubristic and serve as a comforting narrative for both national pride and political considerations. Furthermore, this side insists that wars are ultimately won through industrial bases, a fact that has become sidelined due to a lack of lived experience in the West, which is a lesson also being reinforced by observations from Ukraine (Bonci & Riggi, 2025; Gady, 2024; Vershinin, 2024; Fox, 2024; Rose, 2023). What is apparent, however, even to the advocates of the manoeuvrist approach, is that there are no clear answers yet on how to conduct such an approach in circumstances like the effects of current technologies in Ukraine (Bonci & Riggi, 2025). Ultimately, as always in warfare, the circumstances of any given conflict, which continually change throughout its duration, limit the viable options available to any given armed forces and force them to conduct themselves in a way that seems most appropriate to a given situation rather than the idealistic models hatched in pre-war plans (Fox, 2024). What remains constant, however, is that no matter the terrain, tactics, personnel numbers, or technological developments, attrition will be a defining feature of these circumstances.

4. Attrition in War in Practice

There seems to be an idea that warfare that is primarily characterised by attrition cannot produce victories in war. Examples from past wars demonstrate that this is false. For example, British forces in the First World War leveraged their industrial advantage against well-prepared German defensive lines not through deep-striking manoeuvre attacks, but through small piecemeal attacks along an entire front, advancing in small increments and fighting off counterattacks in the new positions, the so-called 'bite and hold' approach. While not delivering spectacular, grand victories to be shown off, this approach slowly made Germany lose a war of exhaustion. The German counter-offensive of 1918 was a desperate attempt for a decisive battle and victory that was not possible in that war's circumstances and, eventually, the German army collapsed and lost the war, even though the Allies had not taken hold of any German territory (Rose, 2023). This is but one example of victory resulting from a strategy inclined towards attrition rather than manoeuvre and movement.

Beyond strategy, however, one can also point towards instances where the capacity of industrial power and availability of personnel alone decided victory. For example, in the Second World War, where the aerial theatre was absolutely crucial, despite the best efforts of both sides to gain better technology or better trained pilots to gain an advantage, neither of these factors proved decisive. Instead, the Allied victory came about due to the sheer inability of the German Luftwaffe to match their number of aircraft, as Allied industrial power simply outmatched Germany's, which represented a clear-cut case of quantity negating the impact of qualitative factors (Alman & Venable, 2020; Murray, 2023, p. 519-520). These are only two examples, representative of a larger body of proof, that attrition is not an inferior form of conducting warfare. It is not inherently inferior to other approaches. Rather, depending on the circumstances, when a war cannot be won through singular strikes and victories, pursuing a destruction-oriented approach that seeks to deprive the enemy of its ability to fight is a logical conclusion, one that has stood the test of time (Fox, 2024).

The historical record demonstrates the danger of being unprepared to consider the attritional nature of most wars. It also shows that many of the most crucial conflicts in human history were won by the side that was able to meet this challenge in terms of its own ability to sustain the effects of attrition through its industrial production and manpower, as well as through adjusting tactics and strategy to that reality. It is, therefore, crucial to reincorporate these lessons into European and Western defence policy. There are several understandable reasons why there is opposition to this idea. For one, the superiority of manoeuvre warfare reinforces a myth about Western, especially American technological military superiority (Fox, 2024; Rose, 2023). It creates an idealist narrative of clean, quick victory that appeals to our societal sensibilities (Verhaeghe, 2024), preventing us from seriously preparing for the grim reality of prolonged peer-to-peer warfare that had been

seemingly almost forgotten in the West until the war in Ukraine. Even the wars of a different nature, such as the fight against the Taliban in which soldiers encountered realities that made their deeply-ingrained doctrine of manoeuvre impossible and forced them to adapt their tactics (Rose, 2023), have already demonstrated the limits of that narrative in modern

5. Attrition in the Russo-Ukrainian War

Beyond theoretical concerns and historical examples, the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War provides daily examples for European policymakers to reinforce this lesson. The war has not been static at any moment since its inception, though slowly-changing frontlines may give that impression. It has undergone different phases, constant technological and tactical adaptations by both sides, evolving like all prolonged wars, as both sides attempt their best to adapt to continually-changing circumstances (Watling & Reynolds, 2025). Tactical and strategic lessons derived from it must, therefore, be treated with a certain degree of caution, but they do nevertheless provide a relevant source of information for potential future wars. In the analysis of the war, assessments of strategy and attrition differ, just like in the theoretical debate mentioned above. Some argue that Russia is set to win a war of attrition in the current state (Gressel, 2024). Others argue that the Ukrainians are utilising attrition within their strategy as best corresponding to their available means (Gady, 2024). Factually, both sides have been forced into what could be called, although conceptually muddy, strategies of attrition. The Ukrainian offensive of 2023 provides an example of where the Western insistence on the superiority of manoeuvrist approaches proved ill-advised. It is possible that the influence of Western military advisors drove Ukraine to attempt this strategy that resulted in devastating losses and little gain (Gady, 2024; Fox, 2024). Beyond the tactical and operational level, this was also caused by setting priorities tied to political symbolism. Accepting battle in unfavourable conditions and expending valuable equipment and soldiers for politically symbolic but strategically insignificant goals is one of the most devastating mistakes a combatant side can make in an attritional war (Vershinin, 2024). This provides an example of how not to conduct strategy in such a war, and the insufficiency of Western doctrines in this area.

A full discussion of the various tactics and adjustments of both sides of the war is beyond the scope of this paper, but the lived experience of the Ukrainian armed forces has taught them how to best adapt to this war, especially after the failure of the aforementioned offensive, and it is apparent that the central requirement is more material, in all forms of equipment, ammunition, and vehicles that are constantly lost through attrition. Trying to manoeuvre under the current conditions has proven fruitless. Ukraine depends on Western support to continue fighting, but that support has become quite precarious, as European countries have quickly emptied vast amounts of their stocks and cannot keep up with the production required to continue (Marrone, 2023; Gressel, 2024).

6. Ukraine's Lessons for Europe

The fact that Western allies of Ukraine are already having trouble meeting the requirements caused by attrition in the Russo-Ukrainian war now is precisely why the element of attrition needs to make a serious appearance on the radar of European military planners and political leadership. This does not necessarily mean abandoning the idea of manoeuvre warfare or simply preparing static defences. It means accounting for the possibility of a potential conflict dragging out for an unpredictable period of time. One principal component of this preparation would be to ramp up the military industrial production capacity across the continent, in terms of creating an economy of scale, which is already necessary to meet current rearmament aims and supply Ukraine (Gressel, 2024). Nonetheless, this is also to ensure that, in the case of a potential conflict, European armies can sustain high rates of attrition of military equipment. It furthermore means adopting concepts such as 'total societal defence', including ensuring that there is a trained reserve to supplement the peacetime standing armies in the case of war. In attritional wars, it is crucial for a state to be able to replace its losses and generate new formations (Vershinin, 2024).

Since the current doctrines require sophisticated equipment that also takes a long time to train personnel on, time that isn't available during an attritional war, cheap and mass-produced simpler weapons take on their own value (Vershinin, 2024). Simply put, sometimes quantity is better than quality. That does not mean neglecting the technological prowess or advantages of Western armies but instead acknowledging the fact that they cannot make up for insufficiencies in industrial production and societal preparation on their own, no matter the undoubtedly excellent motivation and sophistication of our armed forces.

7. Conclusion

Delving deeper into the debate about what is needed for Europe to prepare for attritional war in terms of exact recommendations is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, the central argument and message is that, given both the historical record of warfare and observations of the current Russo-Ukrainian War and Western support for Ukraine, policymakers in both civilian and military areas must acknowledge and prepare for the reality of attritional warfare. This requires adjustments and reforms in a wide variety of elements, from military doctrine, industrial and economic policy, and whole-of-society defence, the details of which will be the responsibilities of the involved experts, stakeholders, and policymakers. But all the preparations for European defence will suffer from the outset if that attritional element is neglected, and wrongful assumptions about the feasibility of quick victories and technological superiority continue to be replicated. The reality of a future conflict for Europe, with an aggressor such as Russia, is likely to be prolonged, attritional,

and incur human costs that should rightfully make us recoil from the possibility. But, for that very reason, it is crucial to acknowledge that fact, and prepare for it appropriately in time. If an aggressor perceives their target to be unprepared for such a conflict, they are undoubtedly more likely to see this as an incentive to attack. Preparing for attrition, therefore, becomes essential for deterrence, so that such a war may never become reality. And, in the case that it does, to be able to minimise the horrendous human cost that it would entail.

We know that the liberties, freedoms, and values we prize today had to be fought for, and there is nothing to guarantee their survival in the face of external enemies other than our own willingness to fight for them. European states are rearming because they take the threat of future attack seriously. In this area, there is no place for half-measures or hedging one's bets on the hope of quick victories. Our approach to our defence must acknowledge and incorporate the attritional and prolonged nature of war as an issue of existential importance.

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