



ROLES INSIGHTS

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The Problematic Nature of the Naming of the “Ukraine War”

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The Problem of the Phrase “Ukraine War”

War is the continuation of politics by other means, a famous saying goes. In the second section of this piece, we examined the complexities surrounding the term ‘Ukraine War’ from both international law and international relations perspectives. If we look at Russian aggression against Ukraine through the lens of realpolitik, addressing the issue of public opinion becomes essential. Winning on the battlefield is essential for the Ukraine’s survival, both politically and physically, given the genocidal nature of Russian aggression. However, the war is a multifaceted undertaking, and it is taking place within political context. Consequently, it is critical for Ukraine’s defense strategy to secure political victories, which necessitates garnering support in the court of public opinion. Mass media plays important role in informing the public and public opinion in both senses of the word “inform” — providing information (facts, data, etc.) and influencing/shaping the public’s views and opinions.

Thus, the choice of words/terms to describe Russian invasion of Ukraine is extremely

significant and consequential. Although reputable media outlets use precise terms like “Russia-Ukraine War,” they also deem it acceptable to use the shorthand “Ukraine War” in their titles. This is a major problem, as the latter expression obscures the nature Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. The situation is worsened by Russia’s aggressive, adept, and lavishly funded global propaganda machine which disseminates false narratives about Ukraine. Key messages from this propaganda include claims questioning the illegitimacy of the Ukrainian government after Maidan revolution that ousted Russian puppet Yanukovch, assertions about the artificial nature of the Ukrainian nation, and allegations of a Nazi presence in Ukrainian politics. Russian propaganda adeptly engages with the paranoid rhetoric of populist demagogues in liberal democracies—such as the Trumpist movement—in an attempt to legitimize and sanitize its war against Ukraine. It’s worth noting that the Russian state also actively leverages the Orthodox Church to advance its agenda on a global scale. Given the sheer scale of atrocities committed by Russians against Ukrainians during this phase of war against Ukraine, it is imperative for Ukraine to disseminate accurate information about the Russian-Ukrainian war. The key element of this strategy is calling a spade a spade. The Russian war on Ukraine should be accurately portrayed and understood for what it is — an unprovoked and unlawful act of aggression. Ukrainian academics and diplomatic missions should take a central role in spreading accurate information about this war, in order to win public opinion and secure support from as many national governments as possible, with the aim of ending the war on terms favorable to Ukraine.

Reflections on the Use of the Phrase “Ukraine War”

Governments throughout the world officially do not use the phrases “Ukrainian War” or “Ukraine War”. As a result, international organizations like the UN likewise do not use such naming conventions for the conflict. Many states and IGOs are more precise in their references to the war, describing it as a “full-scale invasion of Russia” or “aggression of Russia” to accurately convey the legal context of the situation. These entities are also apparently aware of the problematic nature of the phrase, “Ukrainian War”. In order to avoid the political connotations, governments and

international organizations simply avoid using the phrase. Despite the political sensitivity, however, journalists and even scholars so often carelessly use the phrase; the reason being that it is simple and an editor can reduce the number of words in titles. However, the choice of phrasing may inadvertently reflect a political stance, which those using the phrase may or may not intend. The phrase may be chosen for its journalistic impact to quickly catch the reader's attention. Beyond this commercial rationale, there also seem to be some conventional reasons behind the scenes, which carry sensitive political implications. In order to identify the problematic nature of the expression, let us explore three major patterns of the way we name wars.

First, the traditional manner of naming a war is to use the names of the two warring states. This custom became prevalent around the 19th century during the times of great power politics and after the establishment of international law based upon the concept of state sovereignty. For instance, when Japan waged war against Russia in 1904, the war was called "Russo-Japanese War". In this way, many scholars are now using the expression "Russo-Ukraine War" to describe the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine as objectively as possible.

Second, when the number of warring parties are so numerous that mentioning of only a few would be misleading, the task of naming the war becomes problematic. Typical examples are the "First World War" or the "Thirty Years War", etc. Similarly, a series of wars may be described using various terms, such as the war known in Israel as the "Yom Kippur War, which is referred to in the Arab World as the "October War". This approach to naming has not been applied to the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine. Although NATO member states are currently offering strong support to Ukraine, they are not actually parties to the conflict. Therefore, the warring parties are only the two states: Russia and Ukraine. In addition, there is no clear consensus on any culturally symbolic or period-descriptive characteristics of the war that inform how it is so referred.

Third, a war sometimes carries the name of a particular geographical area especially when the geographical location is related to the vital war agenda. Classic examples would include the "Crimean War" or "Falkland Islands War (Conflict)". Since the end of WWII in 1945, the majority of armed conflicts have been intra-state wars. As a result, it has become increasingly common to name wars after the specific geographical regions where the armed conflicts take place, such as the

“Biafran War” or the “Tigray Conflict”. This naming convention is also seen inter-state wars, particularly when the conflict arises from a territorial dispute, as in the cases of the “Kashmir Conflict” or the “Cyprus Conflict”. When a civil war encompasses nearly the entire geographical territory of a sovereign state, the conflict is often named after the state itself, as in examples like the “Sierra Leone Civil War” or the “Liberian Civil War”.

When the United States labeled its 2001 military campaign against the Taliban in Afghanistan the “Afghanistan War”, and its 2003 invasion of Iraq as the “Iraq War”, it was employing the third pattern of war naming. They named the war after the name of the state where the war took place geographically. After 1945, the United States has consistently used this geographical naming pattern in its 20th-century military engagements, as seen in conflicts like the “Korean War” and the “Vietnam War”. Yet, these wars had the structure of the confrontation between the same national groups before active U.S. involvement. It can be said that the U.S. only intervened in wars between the same national groups, even if its intervention may have intensified the wars significantly. The “Bosnian Conflict” and the “Kosovo Conflict” involved U.S. intervention in civil wars via NATO, either with the backing or under scrutiny of the UN Security Council. In the case of the 2001 Afghanistan War, it is important to note that a civil war had already been ongoing in Afghanistan prior to the U.S. invasion. However, we typically make a distinction between the civil war in Afghanistan before 2001 and the conflict initiated by the U.S. in 2001. In the case of the “Iraq War” of 2003, it was more clearly the case that the U.S. started the war by invading Iraq. There had been no substantively continuous civil war in Iraq before the US invasion.

The George W. Bush administration liked to use the phrase, the “Global War on Terror (GWOT)”, which served as a sweeping, rhetorical characterization of global conflict under the Bush Doctrine’s “you’re either with us or without us” stance. Yet if the two wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were geographically confined wars in the larger GWOT, it could have been possible that the two wars were treated as territorial wars of a larger war, rather than just wars between sovereign states. Nevertheless, the GWOT was in the end such an abstract war that the argument would not sound sufficiently plausible. In fact, most international lawyers today consider the “Iraq War” or the “US

invasion in Iraq” as an unlawful act of aggression. The choice between the two possible names for the same event is inherently tied to our assessment of the legality of the U.S. action in 2003.

It is here that the very problematic nature of the phrasing of the “Ukrainian War” appears. If we refer to the U.S. action in 2003 the “Iraq War”, rather than the “U.S. aggression in Iraq” or even the “U.S.-Iraq War”, it opens the door for accepting Russia’s argument that their “special military operation” is a fight against “oppression by the Neo-Nazi regime in Kyiv” and the “imperial expansion of NATO.” This argument is used to justify protecting the “Russian speaking population’s “war of independence” in parts of Ukraine (originally limited to Donetsk, Luhansk, and Crimea, but now also including Zaporizhzhia and Kherson, which Russia eventually aims to annex). The vast majority of countries globally avoid using the term “Ukrainian War”, at least officially. This is because approximately three-quarters of UN General Assembly members voted in favor of a resolution recognizing Russia’s actions as “aggression”, which is inherently illegal under international law and violates the UN Charter. Notably, those who use the phrase, the “Ukrainian War” or “Ukraine War”, are challenging this subtle yet significant standpoint in favor of Russia to the detriment of Ukraine.

The phrase, “Ukrainian War”, is truly problematic legally and politically. The U.S., which is responsible for the invasion in Iraq in 2003, is now a major supporter of Ukraine. The U.S. government, however, is cautious in its terminology, deliberately avoiding the use of the phrases “Ukrainian War” or “Ukraine War”, to highlight the illegality of Russia’s actions in Ukraine. Nonetheless, many Americans, including journalists and scholars, freely use the terms “Ukrainian War” or “Ukraine War”, seemingly without questioning the implications of such naming, as they did with the “Iraq War”. Those hesitant to challenge popular American sentiment may avoid questioning the problematic nature of the phrases, the “Ukrainian War” as well as the “Iraq War”. In doing so, they inadvertently align with President Vladimir Putin’s narrative, which frames Russia’s actions as a “special military operation” in Ukraine’s so-called war of independence.

Should proponents of the “Global South” against the “Global North” or those with anti-US or anti-Western ideologies begin to argue for replacing the term “Iraq War” with something equivalent to the “U.S. full-scale invasion of Iraq”, many Americans may find themselves

perplexed. The problematic nature of the phrase “Ukrainian War” and not something more equivalent to “Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine” in this way really entails highly controversial and deeply political issues. One may find it intimidating to discuss the issue. Nevertheless, a heightened academic awareness is essential for a more nuanced analysis of the nature of the ongoing war and its broader context.

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