

Vittorio Hösle: War and Truth

At the end of No. 30 of his series of essays called “The Idler” and published first from 1758 to 1760, during the Seven Years’ War, Samuel Johnson writes the following famous sentences: “Among the calamities of War may be justly numbered the diminution of the love of truth, by the falsehoods which interest dictates, and credulity encourages. A Peace will equally leave the Warrior and Relator of Wars destitute of employment; and I know not whether more is to be dreaded from streets filled with Soldiers accustomed to plunder, or from garrets filled with Scribblers accustomed to lie.”¹

Johnson’s experience of the manipulation of news by the gazettes of his time was still quite rudimentary compared with what we witness today, where the bloodiest war in Europe since World War II is still called by the aggressor “a special military operation”. But the progress that has occurred since would have hardly surprised Johnson. For after all, technological change alters human nature only very little but mostly magnifies its tendencies. In the following I want to address three questions: First, why is the manipulation of truth an important part of warfare, and on which formal techniques does it build? Second, how can the very different types of falsehoods that are produced in times of war be categorized? Third, how can some of the most egregious falsehoods that have been being propagated in connection with the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine be classified according to the categories proposed?

I.

War is the most extreme form of a common phenomenon, power struggles.² Such struggles originate from the fact that humans have strong wills and that the states of affairs that they aim at are often incompatible with each other. Every conflict in a family on where to spend the vacation is a power conflict, but fortunately most of these conflicts are resolved by compromises, in the ideal cases even by a general agreement concerning what the truly best solution for everybody is. The extremity of the warlike form of power struggle is due to two factors. *First, it is not a conflict between individuals but between states – so the conflict extends over a large group of people. Second, it uses the most extreme tool of implementing one’s will – physical coercion including the extermination of the adversary.* For in order to change the other’s will and thus get one’s own will implemented, there are fundamentally three possibilities – applying (or threatening) negative sanctions, the most extreme of which is killing the enemy, delivering (or promising) positive sanctions, and changing the mind of the other through persuasion not based on either negative or positive sanctions. While the first two forms appeal to the rational egoism of the opponents, the third may focus on moral principles that transcend one’s interest.

With a strong simplification, one can say that the first type of sanctions characterizes the political, the second the economic, and the third the cultural realm. The political system is defined by the legal use of coercion domestically and, under the condition of respecting international law, in foreign relations; the economy is moved by people exchanging mutual advantages; the cultural realm thrives by forging a consensus on values. Of course, this is a

¹ *The Idler*. By the Author of *The Rambler*, London 3rd ed. 1767, 2 Bde., I 169 f.

² On the following, see the detailed analysis in Vittorio Hösle, *Morals and Politics*, Notre Dame 2004, 321-362.

strong simplification – cultural disagreements may lead to violence (think of religious wars), and the economy can only function because it relies on the enforcement of contracts. But it remains true that this enforcement occurs through the political system, which in modern times has a monopoly on the legal use of force.

Yet it has gained this monopoly because it is generally considered moral progress that the use of force is centralized and thus diminished and that the state uses coercion following a system of legal rules generally acknowledged to be just. This holds at least domestically, while in the international arena the set of norms that has been developed since the Peace of Westphalia and particularly after World War II has proven to be much shakier, due to the lack of a centralized organ of coercion and the ensuing anarchy in the international arena. This explains the recurrence of wars. *Paradoxically, the overcoming of violence within states may result in greater eruptions of violence between states than in earlier times, since the agents are now extraordinarily well organized and may wage world wars on the land, on the sea, and in the air.* It is therefore in the military conflict between states that violence achieves its peak. It must horrify every moral conscience, because it is accompanied by large-scale killings of people, often including many non-combatants.

But wars are not waged only on the battlefields. *Wars serve a political end, and if this end can be achieved in a different way, it is not only a moral but also a prudential imperative to use other tools beside physical violence.* For one may lose a war against all odds, since surprises easily occur in the military realm, and even if one's victory is very likely, it is always connected with the loss of resources. Therefore, also during the waging of wars, both holding out positive sanctions, such as commercial advantages, and the persuading of others play an important role. This applies particularly to neutral powers in the international community, since their behavior may well determine the outcome of war.

I spoke earlier of “persuasion not based on either negative or positive sanctions.” Of course, also in the case of either type of sanctions the mind of the opponent is aimed at. That is the reason why I mentioned threats and promises. The mere threat of violence, if successful, is better than its application – it is less costly for oneself, and the enemy will still be around and can be subjected to one's aims. And if promises lead to the desired behavior before delivery occurs, one has an economic advantage since one can utilize in the meanwhile the capital for other purposes. Thus, it is crucial that the credibility of one's threats and promises is enhanced. *The hybrid warfare that often precedes full-fledged wars is characterized by acts of espionage and sabotage (today particularly in cyberspace) not only because of their usefulness for the later conflict but also because they signal to the population that the other side means business. The frequent perception of threats that are not merely verbal but have already passed the threshold of physical harm, so the enemy hopes, may lead to fear and subjection. And the indeterminate nature of the threat does not oblige the menacing power to specific actions in the case of non-compliance in order not to lose face – an obligation that under changed circumstances can be very dangerous.*

But the appeal to moral arguments is a considerable power factor too. This has to be conceded also by those who, like me, do believe that true propositions, including true ethical propositions, belong to a timeless realm not subjected to power struggles. But the conviction that something is a moral duty is a fact occurring within the empirical world and as such exposed to causal influences. *Particularly when these convictions are both shared by large groups and concern collective behavior, it cannot surprise that the enemy tries to change them in a way that*

is in his interest. It is not only moral persons who use such arguments; insofar as they promise to be effective, the greatest cynic will not hesitate to appeal to them, as Hitler did when he pointed to the self-determination of nations when annexing Austria and the Sudetenland.³ The imperialist can only benefit if the country he wants to annex embraces a pacifist doctrine. Such attempts at influencing do not necessarily succeed, neither in ads for commodities nor in the case of political propaganda. Their chance of success is higher if the wrong information passed on is something that people, perhaps only unconsciously, want to believe: Already Johnson rightly connects the interest of the propagandist to the credulity of the audience.

Yet there are certain principles that seem to hold regardless not only of the truth of the opinions communicated but also the inclination of the audience to believe them. First, the simple repetition of a statement increases the belief that it must be true. This so-called illusory truth effect was first investigated around half a century ago⁴ and has been confirmed by later studies. It is probably connected to the mere-exposure effect – we usually prefer familiar to unfamiliar things, and often repeated lies have become familiar. This explains the use of the “firehose of falsehood” propaganda model used by Russia – brilliantly described by Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews in an essay of 2016.⁵ While building on earlier Soviet propaganda techniques, the model has very quickly adapted to the new information environment. The news is propagated *in various channels* and *continuously*, so that it often offers the first narrative that people encounter and, due to the information bombardment, there is hardly any time left to turn to alternative sources. The quantity of bad “arguments” trumps the qualitative dimension, the number of fake “experts” drowns authoritative voices, and the amount of (perhaps fictional) anonymous online supporters of the opinion spread is crucial, especially if they are perceived as close to oneself in intellectual and emotional traits. If people move in echo chambers that repeat their basic beliefs, the confirmation bias will let them overlook not only strident contradictions with reality but even logical inconsistencies. Paul and Matthews are probably right with their melancholy remark: “*don't expect to counter the firehose of falsehood with the squirt gun of truth.*”

II.

That warring states cannot communicate their strategic plans goes without saying; and it is also legitimate that they keep their losses secret. What holds for businesses cannot be denied to states involved in a much more dangerous competition. But the right not to say all the truths known to oneself does not entail the right to lie. We have already seen, however, that lying is at least in the short-term interest of states preparing or waging wars. What are the most frequent lies uttered in wars? *The first distinction concerns lies appealing to self-interest and lies relating to moral*

³ See Hans Morgenthau/Kenneth W. Thompson, *Politics Among Nations. The Struggle for Power and Peace*, New York 6th edition 1985, 111 and 375” “This moral disarmament by an adversary invoking the other side’s moral arguments for his own purposes is no novelty; it was used brilliantly by Hitler in the Czechoslovakian crisis of 1938.”

⁴ Hasher, Lynn; Goldstein, David; Toppino, Thomas, "Frequency and the conference of referential validity," in: *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior* 16 (1977), 107–112.

⁵ “The Russian ‘Firehose of Falsehood’ Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It,” Rand Operation, Policy File 2016 (*RAND Corporation*. doi:10.7249/PE198).

claims. Since wars include enormous sacrifices, which most people prefer to avoid, the basic lie is to overstate one's own chances for victory. On the one hand, one can point, even before the onset of hostilities, to the various categories that measure a state's power, such as size and geography of the territory, size and character of the population, particularly its capacity to endure war, natural resources, industrial capacity, military technology, size and combat readiness of the army, state of military technology, quality of the military officers and the civil government including the diplomatic service, number, reliability, and power of allies. On the other hand, after the war has begun, one will inflate one's own successes and the weaknesses shown by the adversary on the battlefield in order to invite surrender.⁶ Nothing is more successful than success; for people do not want to belong to the losers. However, most wars start only when it is not yet certain who will win, and thus anticipations of triumphs are not always credible. If the first outcomes differ from what was announced, the earlier lies may backfire and both raise the morale of the country fighting back and convince hesitating third parties to support the party they themselves at the beginning supposed fated to lose. Generally, the short-term advantage of lying may be offset by the loss of credibility, which in the long term may entail more damage than the short-term benefits. But people do not think much in long term, and under the pressure of war this is even rarer than in peacetime.

Since morale is a crucial power factor in wars and since it depends partly on the conviction that the war one wages is justified and even a moral duty, manipulations concerning the normative dimension are perhaps even more important than those in the descriptive realm. One has, however, to notice that the two types of lies overlap. On the one hand, considering one's interests is not at all always morally wrong – on the contrary, senseless sacrifices are immoral. There must be a realistic chance for success before one enters a war, and the losses must be proportionate to the good that one wants to preserve. Even when one wages a defensive, and thus justified, war, there comes a point where capitulation is more moral than the continuation of a hopeless struggle, even if it is very difficult for outsiders to trace the line. On the other hand, norms on concrete issues are usually the results of mixed syllogisms, consisting of purely evaluative and descriptive premises. The descriptive premises that enter into such syllogisms contribute to the specific moral conclusion and thus have to be distinguished from the descriptive propositions discussed in the earlier paragraph appealing only to self-interest. To give the most obvious example: Under contemporary conditions, wars of aggression are no longer considered paths toward glory. Therefore, every party will try to depict its own behavior as ultimately a defensive one. This is a factual claim, which entails the normative conclusion that one is waging a justified war. There are three ways to justify the claim. First, one may provoke the enemy to strike first. This gives oneself the appearance to wage a defensive war, even if one has deliberately put oneself into a situation where one had to defend oneself. Bismarck's publication of the Ems dispatch comes to mind. That France let herself be provoked was a great stupidity and allows to consider her the aggressor, but Prussia cannot be considered innocent in the matter. Second, one may prepare a forged attack on one's own territory, as the famous Gleiwitz incident staged by the Germans on 8/31/1939 to give an appearance of justice to their ensuing aggression against Poland. Since usually only stupid people can be fooled by such actions, the third and most popular strategy of the aggressor is to declare that what he is doing is, if only rightly

⁶ This holds only on the strategical, not on the tactical level – for there, it may help to trap an enemy by provoking him to a battle pretending to be weaker than one is

analyzed, a defensive war. Of this strategy there are three variants: *The first looks to the past* and claims that one is only regaining territory that rightfully belongs to the aggressor and had been stolen in an earlier conflict. *The second focuses on the present* and justifies the aggression as being ultimately in the interest of the attacked country. During colonialism, colonial powers invoked something like a civilizing mission (“mission civilisatrice” in French), originally with religious meaning, later in purely secular form. Today it is usually restricted to the pretension of humanitarian intervention in order to save a people from its immoral government. *The third appeals to the future* and insists that one’s own attack is “preventative” – if one does not strike now, one will become the victim of the other country sometime in the future. Needless to say, such arguments are unacceptable – with the exception of a strictly defined humanitarian intervention – , for they can be used to justify almost every war, since most territorial borders are the result of past violence, most cultures can declare themselves superior to another in a specific respect, and future attacks by a neighbor can never be excluded.

The justice of war does not depend only on the justness of the cause of war (“jus ad bellum”) but also on the way how the war is fought (“jus in bello”) and on the measures taken after the war (“jus post bellum”). During the fighting itself, concerning justice after war only promises can be made in the case that one’s own side should win – should, however, the other side win, the own population is warned of dire consequences. These predictions are grounded on attributions of horrendous violations of the jus in bello to the enemy while such committed by one’s own soldiers are regularly denied. Since declarations of one’s own goodness by a government smack of being partisan, it is crucial to find propagandists for one’s own lies in countries not yet directly involved in the conflict. They often are paid for their services, but sometimes they truly believe what they say, partly because they are effectively misinformed, partly because they have a biographically explainable affinity for the country whose lies they spread.

Such moral arguments are often only adduced in order to screen personal interests. Sometimes this is done with deliberate cynicism by people who think in their heart that might is the only right, even if today, unlike the Athenians in their debate with the Melians⁷ or more recently many National Socialists, they usually hesitate to profess this principle openly. Yet sometimes people are deceiving themselves too by such arguments because they are ashamed to acknowledge their motivations even in front of themselves and/or want to trust their own governments under all circumstances.

My use of terms like “deceiving” presupposes that one can distinguish within arguments appealing to morals those that are valid and those that are not. Elaborating a theory of just war is not the task of this paper.⁸ Suffice it to point out that the general recognition of the possibility of such a theory is not in the interest of the aggressor. He benefits from moral uncertainty – for if there is no clarity about the moral principles that ought to govern the international arena, it is easier for those who for selfish reasons hesitate to help the victim to sigh that, alas, the moral fog concerning the question of who has the right on his side is no less impenetrable than the famous fog of war. The consequences of the destruction of the belief in our capacity to grasp truth are no less grave in the international sphere than in domestic politics.⁹ Therefore, the aggressor is

⁷ See Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 5.84-116.

⁸ See my book *Morals and Politics*, op. cit., 837-864.

⁹ On the latter, see my essay “Causes and Consequences of the Destruction of the Belief in the Attainability of Truth: Philosophical Reflections with a Historical Example,” in: *Filozofia* 79 (2024), 113 – 132.

highly motivated to support theories that deny the existence or intelligibility of moral truths. And he is no less interested in obfuscating the facts that support moral judgments, such as concerning war crimes that he has committed. One way is to undermine the intellectual and moral credibility of the witnesses of such events, such as reporters or surviving victims.

III.

It is not difficult to see how these strategies have found application in the Russian war against Ukraine that began in 2014 and in 2022 reached the scale of a full-fledged invasion. They are particularly needed since the fact that Russia is the aggressor is manifest. It was less obvious that Russia had been preparing for this war for a long time on the military, diplomatic, and economic levels. But it would nevertheless have been possible to understand what Putin was up to if various factors had not debilitated the insight of many politicians, particularly in Europe: first, a general incapacity to assume that there are people who do not value peace as highly as late modern Western societies; second, a lack of understanding of the changes that occurred in Russian society as well as in the political system with the replacement of Yeltsin by Putin; third, the naïve trust in the validity of international agreement such as the Paris Charter of 1990 and the Budapest Memorandum of 1994, even if they were mere paper tigers; fourth, the continuous declarations of peaceful intentions by Putin, repeated even shortly before the invasion of February 2022; fifth, the dependence of various European countries on Russia's cheap fossil energies (a dependence deliberately built up by Russia); sixth, the unwillingness to shift the budgets from social expenditures, which are honored by the electorate at the urns, to military ones; seventh, the fear of honestly facing the possibility of a war with Russia with all its consequences.

When the invasion started, Europe slowly woke up to acknowledge reality, certainly aided by the leadership of the Biden administration and its generous help to Ukraine. Russia's way to victory stalled mainly due to the preparedness of the Ukrainian armed forces. But the European support and the sanctions against Russia, slow and incomplete as they were and still are, played a role, as well as considerable weaknesses of the Russian forces in technology, morale, and leadership. That a country with such huge armed forces in four years advanced so slowly was certainly detrimental to its prestige. Still, time may be working for Russia. The Russians have, first, learned from their mistakes, and the resilience of the Russian people is a well-known historical fact. It is not likely that they will give up if they do not achieve most of their war aims, and without very reliable security guarantees, the risk that the Russians will reorganize themselves for a future attack after a peace agreement, supported again by a greater flow of money after the lifting of the sanctions, remains high. For Russia wages a war of revenge, which is rarely limited by cost-benefit-analyses, and Putin, his entourage, and probably large parts of the population never gave up in their heart the territories lost with the collapse of the Soviet Union, because an honest reckoning with the crimes perpetrated during the communist rule and the nation's guilt never took place. Second, the current US administration wants to disinvest in Europe, at least what concerns its military presence. The 2025 National Security Strategy and the 2026 National Defense Strategy are very clear that the US aims at a hegemony in the Western hemisphere and wants Europe to learn to carry the largest burden of the defense of the continent.

This is not at all absurd – the US rightly points to the fact that the German economy alone is stronger than the Russian. Budgetary issues, however, are not the crucial factor in the capacity of waging war, and it is still open whether the EU will be able to build up really common foreign and defense policies, recruit or draft enough soldiers, and endow their populations with the spirit of self-sacrifice for a collective, without which wars can hardly be won. Third, China's stance remains ambivalent. It has delivered dual-use goods (unofficially also weapons) to Russia, and its diplomatic support has been steady. Yet unlike North Korea, it has not joined the war. This may change if China decides to attack Taiwan and thinks that a war on two fronts will discourage the US to step in; and it will certainly feel justified to intervene in a territory that according to international law is its own if the US continues its neo-imperialist policies.

Even if a fragile peace is forged, Russia will therefore not give up its relentless propaganda war. It will mix truths with lies, in order to make the latter more credible, and will appeal to the bad conscience of Europeans because of their inappropriate behavior toward Russia after 1991, to their desire for cheap energy, and to their fear of a military involvement by offering them pseudo-moral arguments as secondary rationalizations of their more selfish motives. These arguments aim first at creating an acceptance of the Russian territorial claims. Russia, so we have heard and will continue to hear, owns Ukraine since at least the 17th century. The historical question is complex, but it is of no relevance for the legal and moral question. The collapse of the Soviet Union was not the result of Western machinations but of the Belovezha Accords, the driving force behind which was the Russian president Yeltsin, who wanted to become a sovereign ruler. The second specious argument is that Russia had a right to break the Paris Charter and the Budapest Memorandum since NATO expanded against all promises eastward. Such promises may have been unofficially uttered orally in a vague form, but they never became part of a legally binding treaty. In any case, the understandable Russian disappointment at the expansion of NATO, from which oneself was excluded, could never justify or excuse the violation of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine. No less absurd is the claim that the possibility of an extension of NATO to Ukraine would constitute a serious threat to Russia. Russia has the largest nuclear arsenal of the world and a long record of imperial intervention in other countries. How can such a country make anyone believe that it was threatened when the Baltic states joined NATO? The true reason for this protest was that the enlargement of NATO rendered the plans of restoring the old Soviet Union far more difficult to implement. The NATO furthermore has only once in its history of more than 75 years triggered Article 5, namely after 9/11/2001 against Afghanistan, with Russia not protesting at all against it. True enough, the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 occurred without authorization of the Security Council of the UN, and even if the intervention was justified as humanitarian and led to the end of a long and bloody civil war with a clearly proportionate number of casualties on the Serbian side, one may defend the position that the upholding of international law would have been preferable. But there is no legitimate way to compare this possible moral blunder with the wanton aggression against a peaceful country now stretching over four years with the declared aim of annexing most of it and with a number of casualties, military and civilian, incomparably superior.

Repulsive are the present-related claims that the Ukrainians are culturally inferior, corrupt peasants who have shown their deep ingratitude to Russia. Ingratitude for what? The Holodomor? Yes, corruption is a serious problem in Ukraine (we have to recognize the truth if our criticism of lies has to be taken seriously), but, first, unlike genocide, that is never a justification for intervention, and second, while in the Corruption Perceptions Index by

Transparency International 2024, Ukraine ranks quite low among European countries (it shares with Serbia the 105th place worldwide), Russia trumps it with the 154th place. Particularly heinous is the Russian insinuation that Ukraine is a fascist country. There are disagreeable forms of Ukrainian nationalism but Ukraine is the only East Slavic country that made a successful transition to a stable democracy, while the parallels between Russia's development in the last three decades and that of Germany in the 1930s are quite striking.¹⁰ That the man who has started greatest war of annexation since Adolf Hitler pretends to be engaged in a war against fascism is pure effrontery.

As I said before, a country at war needs seemingly neutral propagandists in foreign countries in order to enhance its credibility. What remains astonishing in the actual situation is that Russia continues to find such propagandists both among right-wing parties, which approve policies based on aggressive nationalism, but also among former fans of the Soviet Union, whose socialist ideals Putin has completely abandoned. This shows that emotional attachment plays a greater role in political convictions than an analysis based on abstract principles.

But the greatest threat to the recognition of the basic moral principles that should govern international relations and a sober acknowledgment of the facts of contemporary history is in my eyes even deeper. It is a decline of reason, of the capacity to orient oneself according to universal principles. The resurgence of liberal democracies after World War II was based on common values, which were implemented in very different geographic areas. Japan or South Korea belonged to the so-called "Western family" despite great geographical distance and a very different cultural history, and the USA was the leader of this intercontinental alliance. The rise of geopolitics – not as a legitimate descriptive tool but as the normative theory that the physically contiguous areas should be the focus of one's interests and that the great powers have a "natural right" to dominate their weaker neighbors – characterizes not only Putin's war of aggression but more and more also the foreign policy of the US. May the remaining liberal democracies be able to join forces to defend their standards, as Mark Carney so powerfully expressed it in Davos in January 2026! And may we intellectuals contribute to upholding and strengthening the intellectual and moral standards without which fake truths created in more and more brutal power struggles will swallow the world!

¹⁰ For a detailed comparison, see my book: *Mit dem Rücken zu Russland*, Baden-Baden 2022, 26-44.