

On the origins of the war in Ukraine: A reply to Gideon Rachman of the Financial Times

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14 February 2023

This article was initially posted as a thread on Twitter

Financial Times columnist Gideon Rachman has long enjoyed a reputation as one of the more thoughtful journalists employed by the capitalist press. That has been badly damaged by his response to the Ukraine War, which consists of total acceptance of NATO's propaganda narrative.

Rachman's latest self-inflicted wound to his reputation is a column attacking US academic John Mearsheimer's well-grounded claim that the Biden administration's plan to bring Ukraine into NATO created an existential threat to Russia that triggered its invasion last February.

Titled "It makes no sense to blame the west for the Ukraine war," Rachman's column declares that Mearsheimer's position on the war stands "reality on its head."

Rachman argues: "The argument that the US bears responsibility for the war in Ukraine ignores a principle fundamental to both morality and law — that the responsibility for a murder, or a murderous invasion, lies with the person who pulls the trigger or gives the command."

This is, as any serious historically-grounded study of war demonstrates, an utterly banal and false analogy. Individual homicides and wars between nations involve profoundly different levels of causality.

War is an event that arises from the complex interaction of social, economic and geopolitical processes and interests, operating on a global scale. The real cause of a war is rarely answered by determining who fired "the first shot."

In tracing the origin of a war, historians grapple with the interaction of domestic and international pressures operating on the major state actors and decision

makers.

Moreover, in the run-up to the outbreak of war, the contending parties — to obtain the political and propaganda advantage of being able to claim the moral high ground — often attempt to maneuver their potential enemy into initiating hostilities.

But as the war unfolds and the underlying issues and aims come into focus, the significance of the "first shot" as an explanatory factor recedes in importance. The attack on Fort Sumter in 1861 began the conflict but did not "cause" the Civil War.

The assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo in 1914 provided the pretext for a war that had long been in preparation. But the murder was not the essential cause of World War I.

In the case of the present Ukraine War, the Russian invasion of February 24, 2022 was preceded by a long chain of events. Rachman seems to have forgotten that war had been raging in eastern Ukraine since 2014, resulting in more than 14,000 deaths.

Moreover, the fighting in the Donbass region had been precipitated by the overthrow of the pro-Russian elected government in Kiev in a coup supported and largely financed by the United States.

The origin of the war can be traced still further back, at least to the dissolution of the USSR in December 1991, which triggered a chain reaction of national and ethnic conflicts. A similar process had unfolded in Yugoslavia after its breakup in 1990-91.

There is another problem in Rachman's argument. He claims that Russia acts differently than other nations because it is led by a very bad man, Vladimir Putin. Rachman writes that "the character of a state, and of its leaders, do matter."

Putin's badness explains why Russia launched a war for which there was no justification.

“Preventive wars are sometimes regarded as acceptable — but only if a rival nation is poised to strike.

“Ukraine was obviously not in that position last year. By blurring this point, Mearsheimer does become an unwitting apologist for Putin’s war of aggression.”

But with this indictment of Mearsheimer, Rachman hoists himself on his own petard.

Even if one accepts that Putin’s decision to invade Ukraine was illegal because Russia did not face an imminent threat of attack, Rachman bypasses the fact that the US had behaved in a no less illegal manner when it invaded Afghanistan and Iraq.

This evasion exposes the most glaring weakness in Rachman’s argument: His analysis of the war’s origins completely ignores any examination of the policies of the United States and NATO over the previous 30 years.

Rachman does not acknowledge the existence of any connection between the “forever wars” waged by the United States — which have resulted in regime changes, the murder of leaders and massive civilian deaths — and the planned integration of Ukraine into NATO.

In his avoidance of any critical evaluation of the origin of the war, he becomes, to borrow the words he used against Mearsheimer, “an unwitting apologist” for NATO.



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