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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56384/jes.v42i1.430>

## BOOK REVIEW

**Mick Ryan. *The War for Ukraine: Strategy and Adaptation under Fire*. US Naval Institute Press, 2024**

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Mick Ryan, a retired Major General in the Australian Army and a military strategist, offers an insightful and timely analysis of one of the most consequential conflicts of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Through a blend of military theory, contemporary analysis, and grounded strategic thinking, Ryan examines how both Russia and Ukraine have developed, tested, and revised their strategies in the face of a brutal and ongoing war. He emphasizes that warfare is not static, it is shaped continuously by adaptation, leadership, and learning, often under extreme pressure.

The first half of the book, focusing on 'Strategy', dissects how both nations entered the war with vastly different assumptions and levels of preparedness. Ryan explains how Russia's strategy was deeply flawed from the outset. Russian leaders, particularly Vladimir Putin, assumed that Ukraine would fall quickly, that resistance would be minimal, and that western nations would be slow or unwilling to respond. These assumptions proved catastrophically wrong and led to major early failures on the battlefield.

By contrast, Ukraine approached the war from a more realistic and flexible perspective. Since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, Ukraine had engaged in significant military reform, particularly in improving its leadership structure, decentralizing command, and aligning more closely with western military standards. Ryan introduces the concept of Ukraine's "Theory of Victory" as being more than just territorial encompassing political

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sovereignty, security guarantees, and post-war recovery. This broader vision, he argues, helped galvanize both domestic and international support.

A core strength of the book is its recognition of the 'human dimension' of warfare. Ryan does not reduce war to abstract models or purely technological factors. Instead, he highlights the importance of leadership, morale, and strategic storytelling. Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's leadership, particularly his ability to inspire both Ukrainians and international partners is described as a key strategic advantage. In contrast, Russia's centralized and rigid command structure limited its capacity for adaptation and innovation.

The battle for narrative is shown as almost as important as the battle for territory. Ukraine's ability to portray itself as a democratic underdog fighting for survival helped it maintain Western military and financial support. Ryan notes that this strategic use of messaging is an underappreciated but crucial aspect of modern conflict.

The second half of the book shifts focus to 'adaptation' how both militaries have responded to the unexpected realities of war. Ryan stresses that successful warfare today depends not only on planning but also on an institution's ability to adapt in real time. Ukraine emerges as a case study in wartime innovation: employing drones, commercial off-the-shelf technologies, rapid decision-making, and data-driven targeting systems with remarkable effectiveness. It adapted its tactics, its use of terrain, and its command structures to respond to a numerically superior adversary.

Russia, while not entirely static, is portrayed as being significantly more constrained in its ability to adapt. Bureaucratic inefficiencies, corruption, poor morale, and a legacy of Soviet-style command structures all hinder its military evolution. Still, Ryan acknowledges that Russia has not stood still and has, in some areas, improved its battlefield performance overtime.

Overall, the war for Ukraine is a highly readable yet deeply analytical book. Ryan's military experience brings credibility and clarity to his arguments, and his ability to synthesize tactical, strategic, and institutional dynamics is commendable. The prose is accessible to non-specialists, while still offering valuable insights to defence professionals, policy-makers, and academics.

However, one limitation is that the book leans heavily toward the Ukrainian perspective, which, while understandable given the moral and strategic context, occasionally, results in less critical examination of Ukraine's own strategic missteps or vulnerabilities. Additionally, since the war is ongoing, some of the analysis may soon be overtaken by new developments.

Mick Ryan's "The War for Ukraine: Strategy and Adaptation under Fire" stands out as one of the most important early strategic assessments of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. It goes beyond surface-level commentary to explore how strategy, leadership, and adaptation determine the course of war. By analysing how both Ukraine and Russia are fighting, learning and evolving, Ryan offers valuable lessons for the future of warfare and for any nation that seeks to prepare for the complex, unpredictable nature of 21<sup>st</sup> century conflict.