

Interview with
Dr. Mitchell Orenstein



On January 24, 2023, CENFAD and Temple University's Department of Political Science welcomed [Dr. Mitchell Orenstein](#), Professor of Russian and East European Studies and Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania and Senior Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, to Philadelphia for a [presentation](#) on the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War and his 2019 book [The Lands in Between: Russia Vs. the West and the New Politics of Hybrid War \(Oxford University Press\)](#). CENFAD's Davis Fellow Ryan Langton met with Dr. Orenstein over Zoom to discuss his book. The complete interview can be viewed [here](#).

RL: Welcome, Dr. Orenstein, and thank you for joining me.

MO: Thanks a lot, Ryan. Happy to be here.

RL: To start off, how did you come to study what you call Russia's hybrid war with the West?

MO: I've been studying the political economy of Central and Eastern Europe for a long time, since 1990, actually, when I first moved to Prague and worked there for a year. I was lucky to be in the middle of the 1989 revolutions and the immediate

aftermath, and I traveled all around the region. When I took a job at Johns Hopkins SAIS (School of Advanced International Studies) in Washington, D.C. – one of the top international affairs schools – I realized that most people in D.C. were not that interested in the political economy or really the politics of individual countries in Eastern Europe, but they were much more interested in U.S. foreign policy towards those countries, and I began learning a lot about the foreign policy of those states towards one another and towards the West, and also their role in U.S. policy. I began working with a former ambassador to Czechoslovakia, Adrian Basora, who I still work with at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, and we began working on topics like democratic backsliding in the region and how countries are becoming less democratic and, in some cases, out of the Western sphere of influence. This was also after the Russo-Georgian War of 2008, and that was another external event that made it seem like times were really changing in that part of the world.

RL: How would you characterize Russia's hybrid war? What do you see as its methods and goals?

MO: The Russian hybrid war...was characterized largely by their consciousness that they were not the stronger actor. In a way, hybrid war is a form of asymmetric warfare. It is a type of warfare that is meant not to be detectable in some cases, or just under the radar screen, or below the threshold for military retaliation. Things like party financing where Russia might finance extremist parties in France or the U.S. – the kind of thing that could have a very important impact on politics, but it wouldn't really rise to the level where there would be a military response from the West. It was an attempt, essentially, by a variety of nonmilitary techniques, to achieve some of the effects of a successful military campaign – to change political

systems, influence politics, and destroy western institutions such as NATO and the European Union by trying to elect politicians who oppose those institutions.

I think the [hybrid war] campaign can be divided up in a number of different areas. One of those would be actual military methods, which are used primarily in what Russia would sometimes call its “near abroad,” the countries of the former Soviet Union. Elsewhere, [Russia] was using tools such as energy blackmail – trying to get West Europe dependent on Russian fossil fuel sources in order to be able to demobilize Western opposition to, say, the Russian invasion of Ukraine. [Russia also used] huge disinformation campaigns.

I think everybody in the U.S. knows something about this, though people may not believe it happened, but there was a massive disinformation campaign that hit the United States during the 2016 election, and it really hasn’t stopped since then. The 2020 election was also one where there were lots of bots spreading false information. More sophisticated ways [of spreading misinformation] were harder to trace back to Russia, but nonetheless they were happening. There were also cyber-attacks. The U.S.

is the number one country as a recipient of cyber-attacks. A lot of times these are relatively small scale where they hit individual companies and involve blackmail or ransomware, but in other cases they have had pretty substantial influences. For example, the Colonial Pipeline that brought fuel from Texas up into most of the southern states was shut down because of a Russian attack just last year for weeks. Disinformation, economic warfare, energy conflicts, political subversion – there is a variety of different types of what you could think of as battlefields that exist in this

hybrid war, a variety of different techniques, all of which their common similarity is that it is a war fought largely by nonmilitary means. It still has pretty ambitious objectives, such as pulling the U.S. out of NATO, which almost happened pretty recently. John Bolton, I think, said that Trump, had he been reelected, would have moved to pull the U.S. out of NATO. If that indeed was Russia’s objective in supporting Trump in 2016 and 2020, then that would have paid off very handsomely for them and would have been tantamount in some ways to winning a war. I think it’s fair to look at these techniques as mostly sub-military – mostly designed not to get a military response. Now, of course, Russia has seriously overreached with its

most recent invasion of Ukraine, and maybe tossed some of their playbook out, but that has been the playbook Russia has been using from 2007 up until 2022.

RL: That’s a good transition for my next question. Your book came out in 2019, and obviously there have been major developments in world politics and Russia since then, particularly Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine. How does the war in Ukraine fit or differ from the practices and strategies of Russia’s hybrid war?

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MO: Absolutely. I argue this in the book – all along, Russia was using military might and actual fighting since its 2008 invasion of Georgia. That’s one of the reasons why I argued in the talk that this isn’t a Cold War. It’s actually a hot war, it’s been hot since 2008. [The use of military force in Ukraine] in itself was not a big change. But, I think the change, in my estimation and the estimation of many others, was that Russia had been trying to calibrate its use of military force to be relatively small scale and to always have a pretext. For instance, in Georgia [Russia claimed] they were

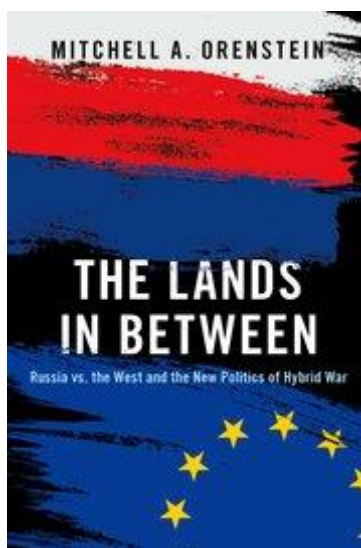
just helping out the South Ossetians. In the case of Crimea, [they claimed] “that was always Russia, those people wanted to be in Russia,” or in the case of Donbas [they claimed] “those people were also Russian and they weren’t being treated right by the Ukrainian government.” They were very careful to create these kind of contexts or information warfare, trying to create some sort of plausible deniability about why it seemed reasonable, to some extent, why Russia was doing this. I think the thing that was different in 2022 was that when Russia decided to invade Ukraine, and invade the whole country, their pretext got called out by the Biden administration. Before the beginning of the war, the Biden administration was saying that Russia was going to invade and it was Putin’s choice, he could invade or not, but they were planning to invade. It was an interesting technique because they made a lot of intelligence public about predicting that Russia was going to invade, in fact rightly. What that did was it got rid of the pretext – Russia did not really have any pretext for why it invaded Ukraine. They went in without carefully constructing the information space and ended up being blamed pretty much universally for invading Ukraine. That was one change.

The other change was that it was a wider scale war. [Russia] will always deny that there were Russian fighters or Russian troops in Donbas – so going from denying this sort of [military action] to invading the whole country is a very big step, and it seems wildly imprudent to me. At the time I actually doubted that Russia was going to do that, but it appears to mark some type of change in strategy by Putin, that he was throwing aside the primacy of the small, undetectable steps and just throwing caution to the wind and invading more frontally. But the hybrid war concept remains important now. Actually, hybrid warfare is a term in military usage that always refers to the association of military and nonmilitary techniques. Sometimes nonmilitary techniques are

predominant, prominent, or more important than the military ones. Hybrid means a combination of military and nonmilitary techniques. I think you still see that with Russia’s strategy. Just because they are really wrapped up in this war in Ukraine does not mean that they have stopped information warfare in the U.S. Quite contrary, it appears to have ramped up quite a lot. Similarly, Russia launched this very elaborate plan to freeze Europe during the winter, to bring Europe to its knees by not delivering gas, pushing up prices, and fostering street protests in Europe, and that seems to have failed. But it doesn’t mean that it wasn’t part of their strategy – that was what they were trying to do. I think that this isn’t just a war in Ukraine. This is a war that on both sides is being fought in multiple different venues – from the European and Western side largely through sanctions, but also arming Ukraine, and disinformation campaigns. I think that the framework of hybrid war allows you to look at the full extent of what’s going on rather than just look at this as a war in Ukraine.

RL: What lessons can the European Union and the United States take away from over a decade of hybrid war with Russia?

MO: It’s an interesting question – what have we learned from all of this? One thing we’ve learned is that we have to be way more sensitive to when we are being attacked in these ways. At the beginning, most people didn’t really realize that the United States was under any sort of attack really until the 2016 election. The 2016 election was a huge wake-up call for people that there was foreign intervention in our elections. Still, a lot of people deny that, but it’s right there in the Mueller report that Russia launched this massive attack on the U.S. one of the things I have seen is a revolution in awareness, and that has gone hand-in-hand with the greater use of this term “hybrid war.” When I started initially looking at terms, I just happened upon it. I was not the inventor of this term, but I was looking at



different terms in different ways that people were describing what I saw going on. I liked the term “hybrid warfare” because it seemed to really underline the multifaceted nature of the conflict and its prosecution through nonmilitary means. That wasn’t a widespread term at the time – people didn’t really know what it was and many probably still don’t, but it has come much more into common usage, interestingly, predominantly from policy makers. Academics tend to be kind of skeptical mostly of the term “hybrid warfare” but we’ve seen it more and more used by [individuals] like European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, who talks about hybrid techniques and hybrid warfare. For instance, when Belarus started pushing immigrants across the Belarus-Polish border, she said that this is a hybrid warfare technique that is being used against us. [Using the term hybrid warfare] induces a lot of public consciousness about the nature of warfare that we are fighting in the twenty-first century.

We’ve also seen the Russians start using the term “hybrid warfare.” In the past couple months, [Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs] Sergey Lavrov has started saying that Russia is suffering from a global hybrid warfare attack from the West. The only key difference between the way he is using the term and the way I did in my 2019 book was that I thought I was talking about Russian hybrid warfare on the West and he is casting the West as fighting a global hybrid war against Russia. I personally agree to some extent that this goes both ways. There is a means of war in this century where we have nuclear-armed powers, and more of them [than before]. The means of war have changed – it’s shifted somewhat because it is too dangerous to have direct military conflict between nuclear powers, so there has been a shift into the use of hybrid techniques, and I think Russia showed that those can be very potent...Now, after ten years, I

think people have wised up quite a lot...People are aware of that kind of thing, they are aware of ransomware, they are very aware of disinformation because it was such a huge part of our presidential elections. All that awareness is important – it’s important for the public to understand, which is why I give so many public talks about what is happening. The military theorists who I read – Frank Hoffman, among others – talk about this as being a new era of warfare. A lot of people point out that none of these techniques are actually new – the Soviet Union often deployed this exact same type of tactics. But, what I think is new is that great powers no longer feel safe engaging in the type of brinkmanship that happened in the Cold War, and they are more likely to be using these hybrid techniques and more likely to be pursuing nonmilitary techniques of warfare.

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RL: Are there any new projects that you are working on now?

MO: Absolutely. I am in the process of editing a special issue of the *Journal of European Integration* on the transformation of Europe after Russia’s attack on Ukraine. I’ve gathered a group of papers, maybe

more than a dozen papers, from mostly European scholars who look at different aspects of [changes in Europe following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine]. I am planning on developing that theme into new research and a new book. I just applied for Sabbatical in Fall 2023 to get that project moving. I am hoping to interview European leaders – thought leaders and other leaders in European security – to understand how a geopolitical Europe is emerging to take on the challenges of Russia and China and try to manage its security interests more than it has in the past. Europe has been extremely effective in responding to Russia with economic sanctions, with humanitarian aid to Ukrainian refugees, and with energy policies that are going to green Europe and wean the continent off fossil

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fuels to a large extent, but it has been very challenged to provide for its own security, and I think the war really showed that the continent of Europe remains reliant on the United States for security in ways that make some Europeans feel quite uncomfortable, because they saw the U.S. almost pull out of NATO, so they are wondering, “if the United States did pull out of NATO, what would we do?” They are pushing for more strategic autonomy and responsibility. I am interested in that, as well as the power shifts occurring within the European Union, and the border shifts. I think this war has had very substantial implications on Europe’s borders and boundaries. It has pushed Ukraine and Moldova to be new candidate members of the EU; it has pushed Finland and Sweden to be members of NATO, awaiting some ratification by Turkey and Hungary. I think it basically pushed Europe’s boundaries to the north and east, and created a different geopolitical space. That’s the topic I want to explore – how are European leaders thinking about [these shifts], and how should they be looking at their security?

RL: Thank you so much for your time.

MO: Thank you. It’s a pleasure talking to you.