

Where War Comes From

A response to the farewell interview of Vice Admiral Boudewijn Boots (NRC, 31 July 2026)

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1. The Admiral's Ten Hours

On the evening of 27 August 2024, the computer systems of the Dutch state began to fail. One by one. Defence, other ministries, the airports. Doors would not open. Passenger lists vanished.

The highest-ranking soldier present that night was Vice Admiral Boudewijn Boots. For ten hours he did not know what was happening. A sea mine in Rotterdam? A cyberattack? He kept asking himself one question: *what comes next?*

It turned out to be a technical fault. Seventy-six critical information systems hung on a single copper ring of ten kilometres. One ring failed, and the state went blind.

Boots retired this week. In his farewell interview with NRC he says three remarkable things. First: "We were mistaken about Putin's intention for a long time." Second: the Netherlands is not ready for war. Third — and this is the surprise — his remedy is not a national exercise. It is the street. Make agreements with your neighbours. One has a water pump. Another has a generator. Divide the emergency kit among the houses.

An admiral spends forty years inside the largest hierarchy the state owns. At the end, he points away from it. Toward the smallest possible weave of ordinary people.

He is more right than he knows. This essay explains why.

2. The Frame Everyone Uses

The dominant story about war is a story about intention. One man decides. Putin wills it, therefore it happens. Change the man, change the history.

This frame is old. It is also convenient. An intention can be deterred, sanctioned, negotiated with, put on trial. Institutions are built to deal with actors. So institutions see actors everywhere.

But listen to what Boots actually says. "Russia has had the capacity for a long time, but we were mistaken about the intention." Read carefully, this is a confession about *measurement*. The West counted what could be counted: tanks, missiles, divisions. Structure. What it could not read was something else. A tension in the field between the pieces. A mood. A pressure.

There is a second way to think about war. It is older than the first, it has better witnesses, and it makes predictions the intention-frame cannot make.

3. The Net

Picture a fishing net.

The knots are the visible things: states, leaders, armies, institutions. The threads are the relations between them: trade, treaties, fears, memories, debts. Most of the time the net hangs slack. Slack means freedom. Every knot has play. A pull on one corner is absorbed by the whole weave and dies out.

Peace is the slack net.

Now imagine the net being drawn tight. Year after year, thread by thread. Alliances harden. Trade turns into dependency. Memory turns into grievance. The play disappears. In a taut net, every pull travels. A small tear at one knot runs along the tightened threads and rips the whole fabric.

War is not a foreign object that enters this picture from outside. War is the *discharge* of tension that the net itself has accumulated. The same machine runs everywhere in nature. The atmosphere loads tension and discharges it as a storm. The Pacific loads heat for years and discharges it as El Niño. A fault line loads strain and discharges it as an earthquake. The forest loads dry fuel and discharges it as fire.

In every one of these systems, the trigger is almost irrelevant. Any spark will do, once the fuel is there. The question "which spark caused the fire?" is the wrong question. The right question is: *how did the tension build, and where did it come from?*

In this picture, the leader is not the cause. The leader is the knot where the field breaks through. Without tension in the net, the knot can do nothing. With enough tension in the net, the net will find a knot.

4. The Witnesses

This is not a new idea. It is a suppressed one. And its strongest witnesses share one trait: they did not theorize war from an armchair. They were inside it.

Leo Tolstoy fought at Sevastopol. He carried the war home in his body, and then he wrote *War and Peace*. Its second epilogue is one long demolition of the great-man theory. Napoleon, Tolstoy argues, decided nothing. Millions of small movements surged like a field, and the "great man" was the foam on the wave. He believed he was steering. He was being carried. Replace Napoleon with any modern name. The sentence still stands.

Lewis Fry Richardson was a meteorologist — the inventor of numerical weather prediction — and a Quaker who served as an ambulance driver on the Western Front. After the war he did something extraordinary: he applied the mathematics of weather to war itself. In *Statistics of Deadly Quarrels* he showed that wars are distributed like earthquakes and storms. Power laws. No intentions required. His arms-race equations describe war as the instability of a coupled system drifting past a threshold. Nobody wants it. The coupling does it. One man, one mathematics, two layers of the same machine: weather and war.

Carl Gustav Jung watched the 1930s from Zürich and wrote, in 1936, that something was moving through the German psyche like a pressure system — he called it Wotan. Not a plan. An awakening of a collective mood that would discharge itself. Jung had made his own descent into the deep layers of the mind; he did not formalize from the outside. His essay reads today like a weather report that came true.

Didier Sornette, geophysicist, showed the modern version for financial markets. A crash has no cause on the day it happens. The log-periodic signature of the coming discharge is present in the data months earlier. The trigger is interchangeable. The tension is not.

And then there is the strongest evidence of all: **simultaneity**. In 1848, revolutions erupted in Paris, Vienna, Berlin, Milan and Budapest within weeks of each other. No telephone. No coordination. No shared plan. A causal chain cannot carry that. A field discharge can. The same pattern in July and August 1914: the notorious "August experience," euphoria in *all* capitals at once — including nations about to slaughter each other. That is not a sum of decisions. That is one net snapping into phase.

5. The Russian Line

Here the essay must pause and give credit where the modern West rarely gives it. The deepest tradition of field-thinking about history is Russian. This matters, and not only intellectually. At the very moment Russia is reduced in Western discourse to one man's intention, it is worth remembering that Russia produced the most powerful thinkers *against* that very frame — and that several of them paid for it with their freedom or their lives.

Tolstoy opened the line, as we saw. But he was only the beginning.

Alexander Chizhevsky (1897–1964) lived through the First World War and the Russian Revolution. Then he did what no Western historian dared: he counted. Across two thousand years of records he tallied uprisings, wars and mass movements against the solar cycle. His finding: the excitability of human masses peaks around solar maxima. He called the field *historiometry* and founded heliobiology. Stalin demanded he retract the work — the Revolution, after all, had to be caused by class struggle, not modulated by the sun. Chizhevsky refused. He spent eight years in the Gulag and internal exile. A man does not go to the camps for a theory he made up at a desk.

Nikolai Kondratiev (1892–1938) found the long waves of the world economy — the forty-to-sixty-year cycles of expansion and contraction that now carry his name. He served in the revolutionary government, built Soviet economic planning, and observed the waves from inside the machinery they moved. His cycles implied that the crisis of capitalism was rhythmic, not terminal. For this, Stalin had him shot in 1938. The Kondratiev wave, note well, has the same period as the war cycles Edward Dewey's Foundation for the Study of Cycles later found in Western data: roughly half a century, roughly a human generation of forgetting.

Pitirim Sorokin (1889–1968) fought in the Revolution on the losing side, was sentenced to death, was reprieved, and was exiled on the "philosophers' ship" in 1922. At Harvard he founded the sociology department and wrote *Social and Cultural Dynamics* — four volumes of measured fluctuations in wars, revolutions, art and belief across two and a half millennia. His conclusion: societies swing between sensate and ideational phases, and wars cluster at the transitions. He had lived through exactly such a transition. He measured what had nearly killed him.

Lev Gumilev (1912–1992), son of the poets Nikolai Gumilev (executed) and Anna Akhmatova, spent fourteen years in the camps. There he conceived his theory of *passionarity*: the idea that peoples are periodically charged with a surplus of collective energy — he explicitly suspected a cosmic source — which then discharges in migration, conquest and state-formation, after which the charge decays over centuries. One can dispute every detail. But the architecture is unmistakable: charge, discharge, relaxation. The net, again.

Four of these five were punished by their own state precisely because field-thinking threatens the intention-frame. A regime that rules by decision cannot tolerate the idea that history moves by pressure. That the Soviet state and the liberal West *both* prefer the intention-frame, for their own reasons, tells us something: the frame serves power on every side. It gives power the flattering role of cause.

Russia, in short, is not only the knot where the current tension discharges. It is also the culture that understood, earlier and deeper than anyone, that knots do not cause discharges. There is a bitter irony in this, and an opening: any future conversation with Russia can begin from its own greatest minds.

6. Where the Tension Comes From

If war is a discharge, the real question moves one level up. What loads the net? Three answers deserve to stand side by side. They do not exclude each other. In a layered system one expects all three to run at once — just as the weather has its own internal dynamics, solar forcing, *and* the shape of the mountains, all together.

First: the cycle excites itself. This is the lesson of El Niño. The Pacific oscillator needs no external driver: each discharge slowly loads the next charge. Translated: after every war the net relaxes, and precisely that relaxation — rebuilding, prosperity, forgetting — draws it tight again. The veterans die. The memory evaporates. The slack disappears. On this reading the mood that precedes a war does not come from anywhere. It is the recoil of the previous discharge. Its signature would be an internal rhythm, roughly the length of a generation of forgetting. The Kondratiev–Dewey half-century fits this suspiciously well. Europe's last discharge ended in 1945. Count the generations.

Second: the tension is handed down from a higher layer. Chizhevsky's solar coupling is the first rung of a ladder that goes much further up — the next section climbs it.

Third: structure-debt. A society that organizes itself ever more tightly — more rules, more centralization, more copper rings with seventy-six systems attached — builds tension against its own ground state. The relaxed condition of a human network is broad, redundant connection: many thin threads, much play. Modern efficiency replaces the weave with hubs. Every hub is a knot pulled tight. On this reading the pre-war mood is the pressure of the slack net against its own over-tensioning: the medium wants to return. The signature here would be tension growing with measurable constraint-density — regulation, centralization, coupling — rather than with any clock or any star.

These three signatures — internal rhythm, solar rhythm, structure measure — are empirically separable. That single fact moves the whole question from speculation to research.

7. The Higher Windings

Now the ladder. Because the second answer is not mysticism. Every rung of it has been measured. Astronomy simply files the rungs in separate departments and never reads them as one.

The sun does not stand still. It drags the entire solar system around the galactic centre at some 230 kilometres per second. One circuit — one galactic year — takes roughly 225 to 250 million years. On top of that the sun oscillates through the galactic plane every 60-odd million years, and periodically crosses the spiral arms. The sun *rides through a landscape*: dense arms, thin gaps, cold molecular clouds.

And the medium along the road genuinely differs. At this moment the sun moves through the Local Interstellar Cloud, inside the Local Bubble — a cavity blown clear by ancient supernovae. The heliosphere is, quite literally, the surface where the sun's own net presses against the larger one. This is not a metaphor. Voyager 1 and Voyager 2 have flown *through* that boundary and measured it: the pressure jump, the field, the fold.

Higher still: the Milky Way itself is falling — toward Andromeda, and with the whole Local Group along the great flow toward the Laniakea basin. The outermost reference we can see is the dipole in the cosmic microwave background: we move at about 370 kilometres per second relative to the oldest light there is. So at least four windings turn above us: sun around the galactic centre, oscillation through the plane, galaxy within the Local Group, Local Group within the great flow. Rotation inside rotation inside rotation.

Does any of this reach the ground? The hand-me-down chain is documented link by link. The heliosphere is a shield against galactic cosmic rays. When the environment thickens or the sun weakens, more radiation reaches the atmosphere. Henrik Svensmark showed in his own laboratory — the SKY experiment — that this radiation seeds cloud formation. Nir Shaviv found that Earth's great ice-age eras coincide with the sun's spiral-arm crossings, on the ~140-million-year beat. And Chizhevsky, at the bottom of the ladder, found the solar cycle in the excitability of crowds.

Read as one chain: galactic landscape → heliospheric tension → solar and radiation climate → atmosphere → biosphere → the human net. The mood that precedes a war then has an address. It is the weather of a higher winding, passed down along the threads. The current solar cycle, for what it is worth, peaked in 2024–2025.

None of this removes human responsibility, any more than a meteorologist removes the arsonist. It relocates the *explanation*. The arsonist is real. But the question "why did the whole forest burn?" is never answered at the level of the match.

8. What the Instruments Would Show

The field-frame earns its place by predicting what the intention-frame cannot.

A system approaching a phase transition slows down. Its fluctuations grow longer and larger. Rising autocorrelation, rising variance — the early-warning signals now standard in tipping-point research, from lakes to climate to epileptic seizures. If a pre-war mood is a real field state, it must carry this signature *before* any leader does anything. And it must carry it across layers at once: in sickness-absence statistics, in prescription rates, in the language of newspapers, in music, in birth rates.

The Netherlands, as it happens, is already recording one such trace without recognizing it. Young people in their twenties are entering disability insurance with mental complaints in unprecedented numbers. The standard frame explains this the standard way: individually, causally, one biography at a time. The field-frame reads it differently: the same tension that loads the geopolitical layer presses individual knots out of phase at the smallest winding. One mood, three layers — geopolitical hardening, social brittleness, personal decoherence. In the causal frame their co-timing is coincidence. In the field-frame it is a single signal, read three times.

That is a testable difference. The intention-frame expects a separate explanation per layer. The field-frame expects one signature.

9. The Admiral's Street

Which returns us to Boots, and to why his strangest advice is his best.

The copper ring taught him what a hub is: all the tension of a network concentrated in one knot. His answer — the water pump at one neighbour, the generator at the next, the emergency kit divided along the street — is the opposite move. It restores the weave. Many thin threads. Play in every knot. A tear that runs into slack, and dies.

A national exercise would add structure to a system already suffering from structure-debt. The street-agreement adds *coherence at the smallest winding* — which is the only place where a taut net can be loosened without commanding it. Boots also says: everyone at Defence, from the cashier to the front soldier, should know their task if war comes. In net-terms: every knot knows its address in the war configuration. A net whose knots know their places discharges with less violence, or not at all.

The admiral spent forty years at the hub. On his way out, he pointed at the weave. The oldest Russian insight and the newest Dutch instinct meet in the same picture: history is not decided at the knot. It is carried, loaded and — if we learn to read the tension in time — perhaps even relaxed, along the threads.

The war, if it comes, will not come from one man. It will come from the net. And the net runs through your street.

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