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Citation: Clifford, E. (2023). Everyday War: The Conflict over Donbas, Ukraine. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 25(5), pp. 976-980. doi: 10.1080/14616742.2023.2269937

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Link to published version: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2023.2269937>

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Everyday War: The Conflict Over Donbas, Ukraine

by Greta Lynn Uehling, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2023, 210 pp., \$31.95 (paperback), ISBN13 9781501767593

Andrii and Tetiana had been married for thirty years before war found their hometown of Dnipro, central Ukraine. Now separated, the couple candidly attribute the breakdown of their marriage to Russia's 2022 invasion of their country (Gettleman 2023). They represent just one example of a dramatically rising divorce rate in Ukraine. This "divorce epidemic," as reported in the *New York Times*, "may be one of the war's most far-reaching social consequences, potentially shaping dating patterns, family structure, the way a whole generation of Ukrainian children will be raised and the trajectory of the country's population for years to come" (ibid.). Marital relations, the article suggests, are a lesser known casualty of this war. An ongoing travel ban for men ages 18 to 60 has resulted in a Ukrainian refugee population primarily composed of women and young people. These vastly different experiences of war have driven wedges within seemingly happy marriages, whilst offering reprieve to others. For Andrii and Tetiana, their separation brought about a reflection on, and recalibration of their future.

Greta Lynn Uehling's (2023) *Everyday War: The Conflict Over Donbas, Ukraine* chronicles an earlier manifestation of, or perhaps a precursor to, these experiences. During her 2015-2017 research into the conflict over the eastern Ukrainian provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk, Uehling noted the variety of ways that war reconfigured intimacy. The conflict's mark on her interlocutors' interpersonal relationships extended her perceived boundaries of war, offering an underheard avenue for studying its character and impact. This book underscores how friendships and families became "additional sites where conflict refracts" (76), identifying the interpersonal as an important analytical layer through which studies of both war and peace might be

enriched. This is significant not only in its contribution to academic insights into war's social everyday (cf., Lubkemann 2007; Finnström 2008; Wood 2008; Sylvester 2011; Nazaruk 2022), but equally because "relational "wounds" will also affect how Ukrainian society rebuilds itself in the [war's] wake" (Uehling 2023, 160). She thus asks: "[h]ow did people create care and forge peace in the face of indiscriminate violence, and what kind of peace was it?" (4).

In answering her question, Uehling develops the concept of "everyday war," explaining that:

[T]he people engaged in everyday war were not interested in killing, but rather achieving and maintaining a greater sense of connection [...] They did what they did not to crush the enemy, but to nourish relationship and national belonging (15).

Everyday war captures the often mundane interpersonal activity that sustains war not for war's sake, but rather to preserve the patterns of individuals' day-to-day lives and the social connections from which they derive meaning. With this, Uehling deviates from studies of states or elites in wartime, from pathologizing war-affected populations, or exceptionalizing violent interpersonal relationships. Instead, everyday war sheds light on the shifting nature of intimate relationships in the context of physical danger, political disagreement, separation, and forced migration. In particular, Uehling shows how war repurposes loyalty; affective attachments to nationhood, family, and friendships have intersected and entwined whilst taking on the colours and strains of conflict. This, inevitably, goes far beyond the divorce epidemic. In fact, Uehling more frequently encountered her interlocutors' desire to come together in times of extreme danger and trauma, seeing "the human capacity to deliver comfort and care in spite or perhaps because of military conflict" (xi).

An ethics of care is the thread running through this book, stitching together the stories of a diverse array of Ukrainians from both sides of the demarcation lines. Uehling shows how the impulse to care had a mitigating effect on the reach of the war's violence, producing micro practices of peace upon which the social fabric could be (if momentarily) repaired. In critical dialogue with scholarship on everyday peace (e.g., Mac Ginty 2014, 2021), she argues that "the interpersonal peace that was forged could only bracket out war, not end it," offering a temporary, unfinished sanctuary from war's brutality (Uehling 2023, 159). Nonetheless, she argues that the significance of these caring practices and the everyday peace they fostered lies not in their ability to influence the outcomes of the war, but in the potential "to make life more bearable for people affected by the conflict" (156). As such, Uehling traces how practices of everyday war and everyday peace coincide, with relationships an important site for working out the conflict's tensions.

The book's structure lends itself to this objective; each chapter adds to a multifocal narrative about the relationships embedded within this warzone and the caring practices through which they are maintained. Uehling begins her empirical analysis with a trip to Café Patriot, an establishment founded and run by three veterans of Ukraine's volunteer battalions. Filled floor to ceiling with the memorabilia of war, Café Patriot was an interactive space designed by the owners to simultaneously recognize and support demobilized soldiers and ignite social critique of the war. Uehling uses this setting to develop her analysis of feminist conceptualisations of militarisation. She argues that militarisation – as an insidious and largely unconscious process – is an insufficient framework for understanding the café insofar as it fails to appreciate the efforts of its owners to interrogate and subvert militaristic narratives and symbolism. Instead, she recognises everyday war in the café's invitation to the public to rebuild their relational worlds through thinking about the military conflict.

Another key contribution of *Everyday War* is the interaction between embodied trauma and embodied difference in wartime. Uehling charts how those living in conflict-affected areas saw their “world so uncannily altered by violence that it felt as they were living in a science fiction drama” (123). Everyday bodily systems became entry points for sense-making around danger and difference. A repeated concern was the perceived mutation or loss of femininity in conflict (c.f., Enloe 1983), expressed as an embodied otherness to be resisted or contained. Uehling understands this as the manifestation of practical orientalism, the constitution and renegotiation of cultural and national identities in everyday, banal bodily practices (Haldrup, Koefoed, and Simonsen 2006).

This was troubled by the work of the Black Tulips, voluntary Ukrainian body collectors who, for a period, additionally illicitly transported insulin into separatist-controlled zones. Their efforts simultaneously reflect the embodiment of national identity and the ways in which bodies can transcend difference. Moving past the structural regulation of death, Uehling (2023, 151) takes a “necrosocial” standpoint, uncovering interpersonal experiences of death and the caring relationship that form in its wake. Through “necroactivism,” she describes how this interpersonal peace creates “threads of civility for knitting together Ukrainians across the line of demarcation and across politics” (157). This has, undeniably, become a greater task since the 2022 Russian invasion. Acts of everyday war have intensified and the fires of difference and hatred have been indubitably stoked. Nevertheless, along with a deeper historical perspective on Russian-Ukrainian relations, *Everyday War* offers a useful theoretical framework for understanding the invasion, subsequent warfighting, and its violent preface as jointly reflective of the bleeding of military violence into people’s lives.

I only wish that Uehling had engaged further with the critical military studies (CMS) literature. This would have more steadily grounded her conceptual work, in turn

expanding rather than contradicting feminist scholarship on militarisation. For example, Nick Caddick and colleagues (2015), Sarah Bulmer and David Jackson (2016), Joanna Tidy (2016), Julia Welland (2021), and Hannah West and Sophie Antrobus (2023) each discuss how the tensions and contradictions in the veteran experience complicate processes and conceptualisations of militarisation. One could perhaps draw parallels between Tidy's (2016) work on military dissenters and the critical efforts of the proprietors of Café Patriot, or else between Uehling's objectives and Hannah Partis-Jennings' (2022) visits of The Don War Memorial Bar. In a similar vein, bodies, intimate relationships, and everydayness have characterized the growth of CMS as a sub-discipline, capturing the "spaces and bodies in-between" our understandings of war and peace (Dyvik and Greenwood 2017). I think particularly of Kevin McSorely's (2013) edited volume *War and the Body*, or how Welland (2018) draws attention to the plurality of experiences of war, including those of care, friendship, and optimism. As such, I am wary of Uehling's argument that militarisation is a concept that divests people of agency by failing to register their strategic efforts. There is ample evidence to show how individuals and communities navigate, contribute to, and contest militarisation in their own unique ways. For militarisation to be an insidious and unconscious process requires the continual reproduction of everyday war making – whether intended or not.

Overall, *Everyday War* is a compelling, timely, and analytically expansive study of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Uehling's strengths lie not only in her investigative prowess, but equally in her compassion for her interlocutors and desire to honour their intimate, complex social worlds. By centring the interpersonal impact of the war, she recognizes the necessity for a relational theory of war, creating an accessible yet academically rigorous lens for understanding how people know, navigate, and connect through military conflict.

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