

Information Warfare: “World War Three, Inside the War Room”. Making Sense of the BBC’s Pseudo-Documentary

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Preparing the British public for collective suicide?

Or a voice of reason in a world gone mad under US-Russian confrontation?

Is the BBC preparing the British public for collective suicide? Or is its film a voice of reason in a world gone mad under U.S.-Russian confrontation? The Russians and all of ‘progressive humanity’ have been jumping up and down about this pseudo-documentary film. The sound bite from one War Room participant that “I wouldn’t mind killing tens of thousands of Russians” has been trumpeted as a major provocation. Baltics politicians on both sides of the issue are furious. However, seeing the film through to its unexpected ending, one is left with big questions about the intentions of its producers and of its high level participants that so far no one has addressed.

The pseudo-documentary film aired on BBC on February 3, [World War Three: Inside the War Room](#), ([here on BBC Two, for UK only](#)) was described in advance by the BBC as a ‘war game’ detailing the minute by minute deliberations of the country’s highest former defense and security officials facing an evolving crisis involving Russia. What gave unusual realism and relevance to their participation is that they were speaking their own thoughts, producing their own argumentation, not reading out lines handed to them by television script writers.

The mock crisis to which they were reacting occurs in Latvia as the Kremlin’s intervention on behalf of Russian speakers in the south of this Baltic country develops along lines of events in the Donbas as from the summer of 2014. When the provincial capital of Daugavpils and more than twenty towns in the surrounding region bordering Russia are taken by pro-Russian separatists, the United States calls upon its NATO allies to deliver an ultimatum to the Russians to pull back their troops within 72 hours or be pushed out by force. This coalition of the willing only attracts the British. After the deadline passes, the Russians ‘accidentally’ launch a tactical nuclear strike against British and American vessels in the Baltic Sea, destroying two ships with the loss of 1200 Marines and crew on the British side. Washington then calls for like-for-like nuclear attack on a military installation in Russia, which, as we understand, leads to full nuclear war.

The show was aired on February 3, 2016 by *BBC Two*, meaning it was directed at a domestic audience, not the wider world. However, in the days since its broadcast, it has attracted a great deal of attention outside the United Kingdom, more, in fact, than within Britain itself. The Russians, in particular, adopted a posture of indignation, calling the film a provocation.

In his widely watched weekend wrap-up of world news, Russia's senior television journalist Dimitri Kiselev devoted close to ten minutes denouncing the BBC production. He cited one participant (former UK Ambassador to Russia Sir Tony Brenton) expressing pleasure at the idea of 'killing tens of thousands of Russians'. This segment was later repeated on *Vesti* hourly news programs during the past week. Kiselev asked rhetorically how the British would react if Moscow produced a mirror image show from its War Room.

For its part, the world broadcaster *Russia Today* (RT) issued a harsh review which castigates the British broadcaster for presenting Russia as "Dr. Evil Incarnate, the villain that regularly plays opposite peace-loving NATO nations." It saw the motivation of the producers as related to 'the military-industrial shopping season'. *RT* alleges the BBC was trying to drum up popular support for the modernization of Britain's nuclear Trident submarines at a cost to taxpayers of some 100 billion pounds (\$100 billion).

Meanwhile, President Vladimir Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, said it was "low grade" (the words translated by some as "trash") and that he didn't bother to watch it. If so, that is a pity for the reasons I will set out below.

The program also generated a great deal of emotion in Latvia, on both sides of the fundamental issue. The country's Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics tweeted that he found parts of the program to be "rubbish" while other parts had lessons to be studied. Public Broadcasting of Latvia was concerned over the scant support the country appears to enjoy in Britain and other NATO member states, judging by the deliberations in the War Room. For their part, members of the Russian speaking community were deeply upset by the way the program provides grist to the mill of those who view them as a fifth column ready to be used by the Kremlin for its aggressive purposes.

Examination of the British print media's reaction to *World War Three* results in a very different impression of the film.

Reviews in the British press mostly directed attention to the program's entertainment value. *The Telegraph* called the film "gripping and terrifying". The *Independent* reviewer tells us:

It started out as quite a dull discussion but as the hypothetical situation escalated - and boy did it escalate quickly - it fast became compelling, if not terrifying, viewing....It was a little clichéd - the Russians were the bad guys, the UK set lots of deadlines but ultimately wouldn't commit to any action and the US went in all guns (or nuclear weapons) blazing - but then clichés are always clichés for a reason.

In a reversal of roles, the [tabloid Daily Mail](#) ended up doing the heavy lifting for the British press with thoughtful in-depth reporting. The newspaper expressed deep surprise at the way *World War Three: Inside the War Room* ends, with the war room team voting overwhelmingly to order Trident submarine commanders not to fire even as Russian nuclear ICBMs have been launched and are on their way to targets in the West, including England. The paper noted, correctly I might add, that this puts in question the value of the Trident deterrent, which the Cameron government is planning to renew. The newspaper sent out its reporters to follow up on this stunning aspect of the BBC film.

The Daily Mail especially wanted elucidation of two remarks at the very end of the film, just prior to the final vote. One was by Sir Tony Brenton, UK Ambassador to Russia 2004-2008,

who says in the film: “Do we pointlessly kill millions of Russians or not? To me it’s a no-brainer – we do not.” This quote deserves special attention because it was made by Brenton right after his widely cited and seemingly scandalous statement which has been taken out of context, namely that he wouldn’t mind killing tens of thousands of Russians in response to the destruction of the British vessel in the Baltic by Russia at the cost of 1200 British lives.

The second remark from the end of the film cited by *The Daily Mail* which they in fact follow-up was more surprising still, coming as it did from a top military official, General Sir Richard Shirreff, who served as Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe, 2011-2014. Shirreff declared on camera: “I say do not fire.”

When asked about it, Shirreff gave the newspaper a still better sound bite that bears repeating in full:

At this point it was clear deterrence had failed. My feeling was it had become a moral issue – that the use of force can only be justified to prevent a greater evil...if the UK is going to be obliterated, what is going to be achieved if we obliterate half of Russia as well? It was going to create an even worse evil.

It is a great pity that the Kremlin has chosen to vilify the BBC’s producers and overlook these extraordinary open text signals from the very top of the British political and defense elites.

If nothing else, *The Daily Mail* reporting knocks out the easy answers and compels us to ask anew what did the British broadcaster have in mind when it produced the pseudo-documentary *World War Three*? Moreover, why did top former British diplomats, military officials and politicians agree to participate in this film?

In one sense, this film is a collective selfie. It might be just another expression of our contemporary narcissism, when former top government officials publish their memoirs soon after leaving office and tell all. But several of the participants are not even former office holders. They continue to be active and visible. Here, one can name the Liberal Democrat Baroness Falkner, spokesperson for foreign policy. Here, too, is Dr. Ian Kearns who remains very much in the news as the director of the European Leadership Network, partner to the leadership of the Munich Security Conference and a member of teams that are invited to Moscow from time to time to talk international security issues with the Russians. Surely these VIP participants in the film had no intension of cutting off contacts by antagonizing the Kremlin. So there is something else going on.

What that something else might be can be teased out if we pay close attention to their deliberations on screen. I believe they earnestly sought to share with the British public the burden of moral and security decision-making, to present themselves as reasonable people operating to the best of their knowledge and with all due respect for contrary opinions to reach the best possible recommendations for action in the national interest.

In the war room, we are presented with two very confident hard liners, General Richard Shirreff, mentioned above, and Admiral Lord West, former Chief of Naval Staff; and with two very confident soft liners, Baroness Falkner, the Liberal Democrat Foreign Affairs Spokesman, and Sir Tony Brenton, also identified above. The others seated at the table do not have firm views and are open to persuasion.

It is noteworthy that argumentation is concise and apart from the occasional facial expression showing exasperation with opponents, there is a high level of purely intellectual debate throughout. Though one of the reviewers in the British press calls Falkner a “peacenik” in what is not meant as a compliment, no such compartmentalizing of thinking appears in the video. And the counter arguments are set out in some detail.

The voting at turning points in the developing scenario of confrontation with Russia is open. When the participants consider Britain joining the United States led coalition of the willing ready to use force to eject the Russians from Latvia, they insist they will not be passive in the relationship, will not be Washington’s ‘poodle’. This is in clear reference to criticism of the Blair government’s joining the American invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Baroness Falkner is allowed to question the very logic of NATO. She calls the early decisions taken by the majority of her colleagues “sleepwalking”, an allusion to the group think that brought all of Europe into the suicidal First World War. With further reference to WWI, she says that the British government must look after the security of its people and not blindly submit to the wishes of an Alliance when that spells doom, such as happened in 1914.

At each turn of the voting on what to do next, until the very last, the hard liners win out. But positions can and ultimately do flip-flop. In the end the overwhelming majority around the table decides not to press the button.

However, if the participants want to show themselves as open-minded and sincere, that does mean that the facts they work from are objective and equally well vetted? Here we come to a crucial problem of the documentary: Narration of the pre-history to the crisis over the Baltics, namely the archival footage on the Russian-Georgian War of 2008, the Russian ‘annexation’ of Crimea and the Russian ‘intervention’ in Donbass , is an unqualified presentation of the narrative from Washington’s and London’s viewpoint, with Russia as aggressor. The narration of the crisis events as they unfold is also the unqualified, unchallenged view from the British Foreign Office.

The pseudo-reporting on the ground in Daugavpils, Latvia, which is the epicenter of the crisis, gives viewers part of the reason for the fictional Russian intervention, but only a small part. One Russian speaker tells the reporter that she is participating a street protest because Russian-speakers have been deprived of citizenship since the independence of Latvia and this cannot continue. But we are not told what the former diplomats in the War Room surely know: that Britain was complicit in this situation. In fact, the British knew perfectly well from before the vote on accession of the Baltic states to the EU in 2004 that Latvia and Estonia were in violation of the rules of European conventions concerning minorities. However, in the back-room negotiations which led to the final determination of the list of new EU member states, the British chose to ignore the Latvian violations, which should have held up admission, for the sake of getting support from other member states for extending EU membership to Cyprus.

The unfolding scenario of Russian actions and Western reactions does not attempt to penetrate Russian thinking in any depth. We are given the usual generalizations about the personality of Vladimir Putin. The most profound observation we are offered is that Russian elites only understand strength and would not allow Putin to back down, so he must be offered face-saving gestures even as his aggression is foiled.

The objectives of Russian moves on the geopolitical chessboard are not debated. The

question of how the Baltics and Ukraine are similar or different for Russian national interest is hardly explored. Simply put, as the British press reviews understood, the Russians are 'bad guys'.

Moreover, the authors of this war game assume that the past is a good guide to the future, which in warfare of all kinds is very often a fallacious and dangerous assumption. There is no reason to believe that the Russian hybrid warfare [sic] used in Crimea and Donbass would be applied to the Baltics, or that escalation would be gradual. Given the much smaller scale of the Baltic states, each with two million or fewer inhabitants, and the short logistical lines, it might be more reasonable to consider the Russians moving in and occupying the capitals in one fell swoop if they had reason to do so.

At present, they do not. But if the build-up of NATO troops and materiel along the Western frontiers of Russia and in the Baltic Sea continues as projected in President Obama's latest appropriations for that purpose, reason for Russian action might well appear. In this case, the confrontation might proceed straight to red alert on strategic nuclear forces without any intermediary pinpricks that this film details, much as happened back in the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. The British, as well as other NATO countries would then be totally sidelined as talks went on directly between Moscow and Washington.

The tragedy of our times of information warfare is that well-educated and sincere citizens are blind-sighted. We have an old maxim that when you cannot persuade, confuse. The fatal flaw is when you believe your own propaganda. If nothing else, the BBC documentary demonstrates that for Western elites this is what has happened. The reaction to the film from the Kremlin, suggests the same has happened to Eastern elites.

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