

BOOK REVIEW

Carlo Masala, *Wenn Russland gewinnt. Ein Szenario*

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Books that ask their readers to imagine defeat rarely become bestsellers, and in Germany almost never. Carlo Masala's *Wenn Russland gewinnt* managed it within weeks of publication. The question is posed in the title, though not settled there: what follows if Russia wins in Ukraine? Not victory in the maximalist sense of a parade through Kyiv, but the kind of victory that exhausted wars tend to produce, a negotiated settlement that rewards the aggressor, freezes the front, and leaves the invaded country half-destroyed and politically adrift. Masala's answer takes the form of a scenario, a fictionalized forecast running from the spring of 2025 to March 2028, followed by an analytical commentary on what that chain of events would demand of Germany and of Europe. The book appeared with C.H. Beck in March 2025, runs to a mere 116 pages, and became arguably the most widely read and most intensely argued-over German-language title on security affairs published that year (Gutmair, 2025; Kühn, 2025).

The author needs little introduction inside Germany, though perhaps one beyond it. Masala holds the chair for international politics at the Universität der Bundeswehr in Munich, co-hosts the security-policy podcast *Sicherheitshalber*, and has spent the years since February 2022 as one of the most visible interpreters of the Russian war on German television. His previous book, *Bedingt abwehrbereit* (2023), diagnosed the distance

between the rhetoric of the *Zeitenwende* and the actual condition of the Bundeswehr. The present volume radicalizes that diagnosis. Where the earlier work argued that Germany was unprepared, this one dramatizes what unpreparedness costs.

Scenario writing has a long pedigree in strategic studies, and Masala clearly knows it. General Sir John Hackett's *The Third World War* (1978) sold millions by narrating a Soviet invasion of West Germany that never came; RAND's much-cited Baltic wargames of the mid-2010s reached similarly uncomfortable conclusions through drier means; and the recent Anglophone wave of fictional intelligence, from *Ghost Fleet* (2015) to *2034* (Ackerman & Stavridis, 2021), has revived the genre as an instrument for thinking about wars that have not yet happened. Masala's contribution belongs to this family while remaining stylistically austere by its standards. There are no viewpoint characters, no domestic subplots, no technological set pieces. One reviewer called the result lean, almost clinical, and the description fits (Nordic Defence Review, 2025). The narrative occupies the first part of the slim volume; the remainder is given over to argument, delivered in the direct, occasionally impatient prose familiar from the author's public commentary.

The imagined sequence begins not with tanks but with fatigue. In Masala's telling, the United States withdraws support from Ukraine, and Kyiv is forced into a settlement

negotiated in Geneva largely on Moscow's terms. Ukraine survives as a rump state, half-destroyed and destabilized. A new Russian president, outwardly conciliatory and rhetorically moderate, succeeds to power, and Western capitals persuade themselves that the danger has passed. Sanctions erode. Defense budgets, briefly swollen after 2022, resume their quiet downward drift. Migration and terrorism reclaim the front pages, parties hostile to alliance commitments gain ground in several member states, and the procurement programs announced with fanfare during the *Zeitenwende* years remain unfinished in just those categories that matter most (Julke, 2025). None of this requires heroic assumptions. That is the point.

The blow falls in March 2028. Russian operatives, at first without insignia, seize the predominantly Russian-speaking border city of Narva together with the Estonian island of Hiiumaa, while Moscow blocks the routes through which alliance reinforcements would have to move (Masala, 2025). The operation is deliberately small: no march on Tallinn, no general offensive, merely a bite of territory calculated to make war appear disproportionate. It is paired with nuclear signaling and an information offensive aimed at European publics. The North Atlantic Council convenes, and fails. Consensus on invoking Article 5 cannot be reached; the American president will not, as Masala has him reason, risk a third world war for an Estonian border town (Ilka, 2025). The alliance is not formally dissolved. It simply stops mattering, and Europe discovers that a security order can die of a single untreated wound.

How closely the fiction shadows the real defense debate deserves spelling out. Since the Madrid summit, the alliance has committed itself publicly to defending every inch of its territory, replacing the old tripwire logic of enhanced forward presence with regional defense plans and a larger pool of high-readiness forces (NATO, 2022). Germany has undertaken to station a combat brigade in Lithuania, its first permanent deployment of the

kind in the Bundeswehr's history. Masala's scenario functions as a stress test of exactly these commitments. It asks what happens if the plans exist on paper while stocks, enablers, and above all political will lag behind, and its answer is that paper commitments deter no one who has read the fine print. Nor is the geographic vulnerability invented: alliance planners have worried for years about the narrow Suwalki corridor between Belarus and Kaliningrad, the only land link between Poland and the Baltic states, which is exactly the artery Masala's Russia cuts.

The analytical chapters distill what the narrative is engineered to show. Deterrence, Masala insists, is perceived capability joined to perceived will, and both had been allowed to rot. A limited land grab beneath the threshold of unambiguous aggression is dangerous precisely because it forces the alliance to choose between escalation and self-abandonment, a dilemma familiar from classical deterrence theory that Narva, in this telling, operationalizes. Hybrid instruments do the preparatory work: sabotage of infrastructure, cultivation of sympathetic parties, calibrated migration pressure, information operations that erode the public's willingness to honor alliance obligations (Masala, 2025). Against all this the book sets three imperatives, a unified European strategy toward Russia, the nerve to withstand nuclear intimidation, and a deliberate effort against societal war-weariness (Ilka, 2025). What deters, on Masala's account, is not hardware as such but the visible readiness of societies to defend every square meter of their own territory, a formulation he repeats with evident intent (Julke, 2025).

The nuclear thread deserves separate mention, because it carries the scenario's most unsettling implication: the decoupling of American from European security. Masala's imagined White House declines, in effect, to trade Boston for Narva, and in doing so revives the oldest anxiety of alliance politics, the one de Gaulle articulated in the 1960s and the war in Ukraine has returned to the center of European debate. It is no accident that in

the real spring of 2025 leading German politicians began speaking openly about British and French nuclear guarantees as a possible complement to the American umbrella. The book does not resolve the problem, and it would be unfair to expect resolution from a hundred pages. What it does is force the reader to hold the question steadily in view, stripped of the comfort of abstraction: extended deterrence either is believed in Moscow, or it does not exist (Masala, 2025). Readers wanting the technical debate on warhead numbers and declaratory policy will need to look elsewhere. The scenario's service is to make the stakes of that debate impossible to wave away.

The book's strengths are inseparable from its economy. At essay length it can be read in an evening, passed on, argued about; one early reviewer recommended sharing it within two hours of finishing (Ilka, 2025). The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* urged politicians to read it as a warning about what half-hearted rearmament invites (Kühn, 2025), while the *tageszeitung*, hardly a reflexive friend of defense intellectuals, conceded that the exercise made for disturbingly productive reading (Gutmair, 2025). Timing amplified the effect. The book reached shops in the same season in which the Bundestag loosened the constitutional debt brake for defense expenditure and the European Commission presented its white paper on European defense readiness, with financial instruments of up to 800 billion euros attached (European Commission, 2025; Julke, 2025). For once, fiction and policy moved in the same direction.

Reception was not uniformly admiring. The charge of alarmism arrived on schedule, from parts of the political left and from commentators who see in the new German talk of war-readiness, Defense Minister Pistorius's *Kriegstüchtigkeit*, a self-fulfilling rhetoric. Masala's implicit reply runs through the whole book: naming a danger is a condition of averting it, and a warning that works will always look exaggerated in retrospect, since

the catastrophe it helped prevent never arrives. This is the old paradox of successful deterrence, and the book cannot escape it, only acknowledge it. Whether one finds the scenario irresponsible or overdue therefore depends less on the text than on one's prior estimate of Russian intentions, which is perhaps why the German debate over the book so quickly reproduced the fronts of the wider rearmament argument.

What lingers after the covers close is less the military detail than the political psychology. The Europeans of the scenario are not villains, and this is the craft of the thing; they are recognizable electorates doing what electorates do, discounting distant risk, preferring consumption to insurance, punishing governments that ask for sacrifice. Masala's deeper subject is the mismatch between democratic time horizons and the decade-long patience of an autocracy that treats peace as an operational pause (Masala, 2025). Rearmament programs mature over ten years; coalition governments rarely survive four. The German argument over reintroducing some form of military service, running in parallel to the book's success, turns on the same problem in another key: deterrence is ultimately staffed by citizens, and citizens must be persuaded, not conscripted into conviction. The book states this problem more sharply than it solves it, which seems to me a fair division of labor between a hundred-page essay and the political class it addresses.

More serious objections concern method and design. The scenario is deterministic where determinism serves the moral. NATO's paralysis is stipulated rather than probed; alternative responses, coalitions of the willing, improvised formats of the kind the alliance has produced under pressure before, remain unexplored, so that Western capitulation functions less as a finding than as a premise (Nordic Defence Review, 2025). The concentration on a single Baltic flashpoint narrows the analysis further, and escalation beyond the opening move receives only cursory treatment. Julke (2025) presses a

complementary point: by beginning from an abandoned Ukraine, the book brackets the one policy most obviously capable of falsifying its own premise, sustained Western support sufficient to deny Russia victory in the first place. And there is an epistemic unease that any such exercise must live with. Narrative plausibility is not probability. A vividly imagined future persuades through availability as much as through evidence, and a reader gripped by the story has not thereby been handed a forecast. Masala calls the book a *Szenario* rather than a prediction, to his credit, but that distinction blurred quickly in public reception. The afterword revised for later printings, responding to the changed American political constellation, shows in addition how fast such constructions age (Julke, 2025).

For professional readers the volume's value lies less in novelty than in compression. Little here will startle anyone who follows the deterrence literature; the mechanisms at work, *fait accompli*, threshold ambiguity, decoupling, coercive nuclear signaling, are textbook material. What Masala supplies is a teaching instrument of unusual efficiency, and I suspect it will function exactly that way in the seminar room: students who drift off during abstract treatments of extended deterrence will argue for an hour about whether the American president of March 2028 decides wrongly. The scenario also travels well into professional military education, where it can seed wargames and staff exercises without requiring a classified baseline. My one hesitation on this score is practical rather than principled. A text this closely tied to the political constellation of 2025 will need annotation within a few years, and instructors should plan for that.

There is also a case for reading the book from a Southeast European vantage point, although Germany's debate is not our own. Small and mid-sized states are the first casualties of the credibility problem Masala describes: an alliance that hesitates over Narva would hesitate a fortiori elsewhere, and governments outside the alliance's core would recalculate accordingly. The chapters on hybrid pressure read almost like a regional case file, since sponsored parties, information operations, and cultivated energy dependence have been observable realities in the Western Balkans for over a decade. And the remedy to which Masala keeps returning, a society's visible willingness to defend itself, has working models on Europe's northern rim; Finland's territorial defense tradition and the civic-preparedness campaigns of the Nordic states illustrate what he has in mind better than any German precedent does. Whether such models can be transplanted into societies with fresher memories of war is, I would argue, one of the more productive questions this slim book leaves its non-German readers to work out for themselves.

The verdict is qualified but firm. As analysis, *Wenn Russland gewinnt* simplifies; as prediction, it overreaches and knows it; as an instrument for forcing a complacent public to think concretely about deterrence failure, it has few rivals in recent European writing. A short book asked a large question at the right moment, and the size of its readership belongs to the evidence for its thesis, for Europeans have evidently begun to suspect that March 2028 is not safely fictional. That suspicion, more than any single argument between its covers, may prove to be Masala's most consequential achievement.

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