

Determination versus Incompetence: A Military Analysis of the Russo-Ukrainian War

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Abstract

The Russo-Ukrainian War has proven surprising at every turn. Russia for decades was considered to have the second-most powerful military force on the planet. They have shown through a war of their own making that their military is more of a farce than a force. Through a variety of operational and strategic blunders coupled with unchecked political corruption and a lack of tactical cohesion, the Russian military has failed to defeat a country that nearly all credible sources thought was weak and bound to be defeated rapidly. Ukraine has proven and continues to be an extremely capable power on the battlefield. Its ground forces unilaterally forced back an entire operational axis against its capital city Kyiv, and continues to compete with the Russian military at its own game by waging an attritional war on a wide front in the Donbas. In the late fall of 2022, Ukraine launched several counterattacks with US and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies' intelligence backing, and succeeded in driving the Russians from the Kharkiv province and the vital city of Kherson. This paper will explore how Ukraine has survived this 'doomsday' scenario largely thanks to the Russian military's weaknesses it was rarely expected to have.

Introduction

Contrary to every observer, analyst, and expert's opinions, Ukraine has not yet lost. The Russo-Ukrainian War began on February 24th, 2022, and the underlying assumption was that the Russian military would succeed in a decapitation-strike against the weak Ukrainians. Only the opposite occurred; the Ukrainians were able to blunt and force the Russians back on

multiple fronts, particularly around their capital Kyiv. The Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy defied the dangers to his own safety and rallied his people around the cause of national defense. The War has since become an almost evenly-matched stalemate rather than the expected lightning war. The military situation is one of the most important areas of how the politics of the war have manifested. Russian failures stem largely from corruption,

incompetence, and severe shortcomings in combat readiness that were revealed to the world. Ukraine's cohesion, effective adoption of Western equipment and intelligence, and abundance of combat readiness were and continue to be instrumental to the survival of their state. However, the real military takeaways of the War are found in the disturbing similarities the conflict has to both of the World Wars. Many experts have harped on about the War on Terror and other counterinsurgency conflicts having shown how much war has 'changed'; Ukraine presents an overwhelming amount of evidence to the contrary. Rather than the irregular insurgencies, drone assassinations, and other assumed changes to modern war, the Russo-Ukrainian War is one of frontlines, trenches, and constant artillery duels with the goal of whittling the enemy down and breaking through his weak points through attrition as was done in the World Wars.

Russian Attacks, Attrition, and Ukrainian Counterattacks

The war began at four a.m. on February 24th, 2022. Russian missile and air strikes targeted most of the country where Russia's immediate aim was to capture Kyiv and decapitate Ukraine's leadership. This was to be done via several axes of advance along Northern Ukrainian highways, something Russia had done on a much smaller scale in Georgia and Chechnya with mixed results (Jones, 2022). Unexpectedly, Ukraine's immediate resistance was much fiercer and more coordinated than expected. Russian columns were relentlessly attacked by Ukrainian small, mostly anti-armor units with western-supplied JAVELIN rocket launchers. By the time Russian units made it towards vital areas of their attack, like the suburbs of Kyiv as well as other urban centers near Kharkiv and Kherson, they hit a wall of Ukrainian forces (Massicot, 2023). President Zelenskyy's decision to stay put

was touted as the making point for Ukraine's dogged spirit. However, the makings of Ukraine's resistance go back much further than just Zelenskyy's pro-NATO jockeying. Defensive mobilization and planning were already in operational motion by the start of the invasion. Analyst Michael Koffman described Ukraine's early-war tactics as 'trading space for time,' thus luring the Russians into unwinnable engagements (McCarthy et al., 2022). Poor Russian planning and a lack of any semblance of coordination among their units caused their pincer movements to completely collapse near Kyiv. The Kharkiv direction, preexisting Donbass contact line, and the southern steppe region hinged around Kherson and Melitopol all to Ukraine's south became the solidified frontline of the war as the mauled Russian units withdrew from Kyiv (Alperovitch, *The Long War*, 2022).

With stabilized frontlines, dense troop concentrations, and a lack of rapid offensive movement, this twenty-first century conflict has more in common with trench warfare of the twentieth century. Russian High Command in certain sectors, especially around the cities of Severodonetsk and Izum, kept up relentless manpower-draining assaults on these areas. While Ukraine had enacted a massive draft, martial law, and wartime economic production, Russia lagged behind. Russian President Vladimir Putin's fear of upsetting the delicate political balance of power, conscription and wartime mass-production seemed to sound like a war and not the 'Special Military Operation' he announced. Political uncertainty by President Putin caused massive damage to the professional soldiers of the Russian army (Jones, 2022). Entire Russian brigades were wiped out in frivolous assaults on fortified areas. Intelligence sources were able to calculate how high Russian casualties were by the

thousands of free lunches handed out to Russian students who lost a parent in the fighting (Battle Order, 2022). Ukraine only could gain from Russian incompetence and corruption, and began to prepare two major counter offensives in August of 2022.

Through an offensive near Kherson, a city on the Black Sea coastline, the Ukrainians forced the Russians into sending more of their units into that sector to prevent a breakthrough. This offensive at Kherson resembled a ruse; as the Ukrainians launched another large offensive towards the dormant Kharkiv sector that was now lightly defended by military police units in some areas. Ukrainian recon units employing NATO Light-Strike tactics with HIMARS missile support conducted a reconnaissance in force that caused a panicked Russian retreat outside of Kharkiv (Alperovitch, Russian Northern Front Collapse, 2022). Ukrainians armed with NATO intelligence, weapons, and tactics rapidly retook the vast majority of the Kharkiv province in mere weeks, approximately three-thousand kilometers in total. The further shortening of the frontline allowed more Ukrainian troops to target Kherson, which fell before December after a politically damaging Russian withdrawal (Alperovitch, How Ukraine Won the Battle of Kharkiv, 2022).

Conclusion: Winter Stalemate and Future Predictions

The winter of 2022-2023 has recently ended as of this writing. Russia now has the numerical advantage of mobilized conscripts, a shorter frontline, and regained initiative after Ukraine's offensives exhausted their more combat-capable units taking Kherson. Yet it is still launching costly assaults in the Donbass region. Severodonetsk, Izum, and other trench battles have been topped by the carnage at Bakhmut. Currently the city of Bakhmut is the center of the war, and the two forces have many options ahead of them. Ukraine may try another daring offensive perhaps in the Zaporizhzhya region, counterattack at Bakhmut, or sit tight and let the Russians further grind their units down. Russia could possess several war-winning advantages if executed properly, in theory Russian mobilization allows for a continuous stream of troops from Russia's larger population, and Russian missile and suicide-drone capabilities could destroy Ukraine's infrastructure (Alperovitch, Myth Busting with Michael Kofman, 2023). However, Russia's military has proven to be anything but competent in this war, and if Russia is to beat Ukraine in the way every theorist predicted, it has to be rid of the lying, graft, and unsophisticated warfare it has been waging and losing for the past year.

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