

# Putin's Potemkin Army

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War in Ukraine reveals shortcomings throughout Russian military apparatus



*The Russian invasion of Ukraine was supposed to be a rapid assault resulting in the collapse of the government in Kyiv. Instead, fierce Ukrainian resistance, with Western support, has prolonged the fighting, revealing shortcomings in Russian military equipment, doctrine and training. Above, destroyed Russian equipment is shown in a newly liberated part of Ukraine in this Ukrainian General Staff photo published on Oct. 5.*

Sitting in the center of Kyiv a few days after Russia's invasion on Feb. 24, while cruise missiles were striking the city, I spoke with a close Ukrainian friend about what was already shaping up to be a faltering advance on the capital.

"I almost do not want to say it," he told me. "But it already looks like this 'great Russian liberation' is a colossal failure."

What happened next is well known. Moscow's invasion forces bogged down along every axis, and elite military units deployed from Belarus failed to take Kyiv. Russian-speaking cities in eastern Ukraine that Russian President Vladimir Putin expected would greet his legions as liberators instead responded with some of the fiercest resistance seen in the war.

Over the last seven months, the force of 200,000 soldiers sent into Ukraine has lost about half of its strength, according to a British Defense Ministry intelligence estimate. (This number is an aggregate attrition of the invasion force that includes those killed in action, missing personnel and those wounded and unable to return to duty.)

What has happened since has compounded this initial amateurish performance by an army that was once thought of as one of the most powerful in the world. Poor battlefield performance has been augmented by the failure of the army's logistics system, limited air support for ground operations and the near-complete retreat by the Russian Black Sea Fleet after the loss of its flagship, the cruiser [Moskva](#), and Ukrainian drone strikes on its headquarters in Sevastopol.

### **Russian Miscalculations**

Russia made several catastrophic assumptions in advance of the conflict. These were detailed in a recent online forum sponsored by the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill featuring retired Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges, the former head of U.S. Army Europe.

“The first strategic miscalculation is the Russians believed that they had force advantage -- that their capabilities were far superior to the Ukrainians,” Hodges said. “They had no respect for the Ukrainian forces and thought they would roll into Kyiv the way they did into Budapest and Prague back during the Cold War.

“The second strategic miscalculation they made was that they believed they would be able to isolate Ukraine from any sort of third-party support -- that there was no way Europe, the U.S. or Canada would do anything to help Ukraine. This is because frankly we had not really done anything against Russia on behalf of Georgia after they were invaded in 2008 or after they [Moscow] supported the Assad regime and they jumped over President Obama's red line in Syria or after they invaded Crimea in 2014. We really did not do anything of significance, and they obviously felt confident that this would be the case again and so Ukraine would be alone.

“The third strategic miscalculation was that the gain would be worth the pain. In other words, the destruction of Ukraine as a state -- or even the idea of Ukraine as a state -- would be so beneficial to Putin himself and to the Kremlin that any sanctions or other problems whatsoever that came along. It [the resulting sanctions regime] would be worth it.

“And the fourth major strategic miscalculation was they believed they would get a two-fer -- that they would not only be able to break Ukraine but break NATO.

“We know from history that war is a test of logistics and a test of will and over the last six months it became clear that their [the Russian] logistical system was not up to the task -- that it was not capable of sustaining long-term land combat operations outside of Russia. That is

exactly what they are having to do -- of course they did not anticipate this -- they thought they would be done in a few days.

“So, they have had to create a system to sustain the millions of rounds of artillery [fired], the fuel and maintenance and other items to operate thousands of vehicles, rations for 200,000 plus soldiers -- all of these requirements; they do not have a system to do this.”

### **Ukrainians Take the Initiative**

Hodges also noted one of the less-discussed aspects of Russia’s failed invasion of Ukraine. Moscow’s overall military doctrine and traditional war planning have always dictated that any war outside of Russian borders would be a very intense, but short conflict. This, in turn, has prompted Russian military theorists since the end of World War II to assume that a Soviet (and later Russian) military would be able to drive to victory in a matter of days.

Over the summer, two U.S. analysts of the Russian military outlined how the Russian army was optimized for short conflicts and had not developed the logistics capabilities to support longer operations.

“Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was a deeply flawed military operation, from Moscow’s assumptions about an easy victory, to a lack of preparation, poor planning and force employment. Less attention has been paid, however, to Russian force structure and manpower issues as a critical element now shaping outcomes in this war,” the analysts argued.

“Some of the most significant problems being experienced by the Russian armed forces are the result of conscious choices and tradeoffs. These decisions help explain many of the observed struggles the Russian armed forces have had in combined arms operations, fighting in urban environments and attempts to hold terrain ... the Russian army was optimized for a short and sharp war while lacking the capacity to sustain a major conventional conflict at ‘peacetime’ manning levels. The Russian armed forces are now pressed to sustain operations in Ukraine and attempting what amounts to a partial mobilization to stem the prospect of significant reversals on the battlefield.”

In short, Russia’s military has been forced to “fight the other guy’s war,” going up against small, agile Ukrainian formations, rather than a force-on-force conflict against large military formations of NATO-member states. These Ukrainian units, increasingly armed with NATO weaponry, have freedom of command and the ability to harass and disrupt Russian supply and reinforcement operations.

If there is an historical example of Ukraine’s approach to the conflict it is the strategy adopted by Union Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman during the American Civil War, who advocated the destruction of enemy infrastructure and materiel with the objective of ending hostilities as soon as possible rather than the defeat of enemy armed forces.

Victor Davis Hanson, an American military historian, has likened Sherman’s approach to “killing the fish not by attacking them but by draining the water from the fish tank and depriving

them of oxygen.” This is in some respects the strategy Ukraine has successfully employed against the Russian military.

### **Corruption, Dependence on West Undermine Defense Industry**

One of the results of Russian military doctrine is that the weapon systems designed in Moscow were not as sophisticated as those built in Western nations. But they were usually more reliable and had a higher availability rate, though only for the short period of conflict for which the Russian military was organized and trained.

This concept has proven unsuitable for the war Russia finds itself in due to three factors:

- The Russian defense industrial sector has become almost entirely dependent on imported components to produce its most sophisticated weaponry. These components can no longer be obtained due to sanctions. Accordingly, as these systems are lost in combat or expended (as in cruise missiles), there is no way to build replacements.
- Rampant corruption in the Russian military, reaching into the upper ranks, has seen funding to modernize existing weapon systems and maintain reserve stocks siphoned off into individuals’ pockets. Captured tanks examined by Ukrainian troops reveal that almost nothing has been done to outfit many of the platforms sent into battle.
- In the absence of new-build equipment, older-model platforms were supposed to have been maintained to be sent to the front. The results have been mixed. Stories of older Russian equipment that has not been properly maintained falling apart are common. Bombers launching long-range missiles from Belarusian airspace, and beyond the reach of Ukrainian air defenses, are increasingly using the [Raduga Kh-22](#) (NATO: AS-4 Kitchen), which entered Soviet service more than 60 years ago and lack precision guidance. This accounts for the many strikes on non-military targets in Ukraine, including shopping malls and civilian rail stations.

### **Sanctions Leave Russian Industry High and Dry**

Sanctions are having the desired effect, crippling Russia’s defense sector by blocking Moscow’s acquisition of the imported electronic components needed to maintain production. Assessments of captured or unexploded Russian weaponry by the Ukrainians have shown that “advanced Russian weapons and communications systems have been built around Western chips.”

This assessment was provided by Damien Spleeters, an investigator with Conflict Armament Research. The organization identifies and tracks the source of weapons and ammunition and their component parts. In an interview with the *New York Times*, he noted that Russian companies had enjoyed access to an “unabated supply” of Western technology for decades.

Since the invasion of Ukraine, Russian forces in theater are estimated to have lost two years’ worth of industrial production – and this is with the pre-sanctions’ availability of Western components. With that source of supply now denied to them these platforms will take much longer to replace -- if they ever can be.

### **Failing War Poses Threat to Putin**

It is too early to start planning victory parades, warned Gen. Hodges, “but we are witnessing a

major shift in momentum in favor of Ukraine and that momentum has the feeling of being irreversible. I think Ukrainian forces can push back to the 23 February line by the end of the year and can retake Crimea next year.”

The political consequences of such a future and the ongoing failure of the Russian army would likely mean the end of Putin’s rule. This has been the driving force behind his decision to launch what he called a “partial mobilization,” which is in fact a program of forced conscription.

An assessment by Politico recalls past Russian experience in similar points in history, noting that Putin is “not the first Russian autocrat to attempt a mass mobilization to change the tide in a war of uncertain value to ordinary Russians. In the 20th century, there were two that sparked similar unrest -- one in 1904 for the Russo-Japanese war, and another in 1914 during World War I. Both mobilizations eventually contributed to popular uprisings that culminated in the Russian Revolution of 1917.”

The majority of Russians say that they support the war when asked, but the popular mood is mostly one of disinterest. When asked to sacrifice family members and loved ones, their lack of enthusiasm quickly turns to resentment and, in some cases, open revolt.

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Richard Haass, the president of the Council on Foreign Relations, has called the Ukrainian invasion a “war of choice.” Putin could have left Ukraine alone and likely retained power indefinitely. However, having chosen to go to war with his neighbor he is now stuck. Losing the conflict is not an option.

Hardcore Russian nationalists -- some of whom warned him of the perils of starting the war -- are already blaming him for the military failures in Ukraine. The circle around Putin wants him to win the war, but the Kremlin requires the support of the oligarchs, the wealthy business owners who make up the Russian ruling class.

As the now-exiled Russian investigative journalist Yevgenia Albats wrote recently, Russia is not safer, richer nor more powerful than it was before the war, so the question becomes how to measure Putin’s success in Ukraine. At this point, it appears that there has not been any. Many of the oligarchs and their families are now trapped within the borders of Russia due to targeted sanctions and visa bans. In addition, they have lost valuable, overseas luxury estates and access to foreign bank accounts as well as their businesses.

As Albats points out, “I’m not sure that Putin's ruling class, which is made up of dollar millionaires and billionaires and is used to making money in Russia and spending it all over the world, will agree to live and die in a cage. But we shall see.”

**Sources:**

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