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Jan Kallberg
jan.kallberg@westpoint.edu

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Russia's Military — Losing the Will to Fight

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Jan Kallberg



More than six months of fighting have hit the Russian army where it hurts, sapping its will to continue Vladimir Putin's adventure.



Photo: Servicemen of the Ukrainian National Guard take positions in central Kyiv, Ukraine February 25, 2022. Credit: REUTERS/Gleb Garanich

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Russia's failed assault on Hostomel airfield at the outset of all-out war on February 24, when it tried to use air-assault troops to decapitate the Ukrainian government in nearby Kyiv, left a clear sense that military operations were not going the way it had planned.

The decapitation attack followed a Soviet tactical modus operandi established in Cold War planning. In all Russian newsreels, propaganda outlets, and show-off military maneuvers, airborne troops (VDV) were the ultimate

elite as shock troops to get quick results on the group. The VDV got things done. Supposedly.

The attack on Hostomel–Antonov airfield, was a classic Soviet/Russian playbook operation to move into Kyiv rapidly, eliminate or capture the Ukrainian government, and catapult Ukraine into confusion, disarray, and chaos, meanwhile installing a Putin–loyalist regime to pave the way for the Ukrainian surrender. The initial assault would enable waves of IL-76 transport aircraft to bring in the rest of the airborne force and seize the Ukrainian capital.

Instead of a rapid, glorious victory for Russia's paratroopers, however, they failed to secure the airfield because of the determination shown by a few platoons of honky-tonk, rag-tag Ukrainian third-tier territorial defense forces with a powerful will to fight. Instead of kicking doors in Zelensky's presidential quarters, the Russian paratroopers were pinned down in open spaces and started to die in large numbers. At that point, a day or two into the war, it was evident that the Russian plan had derailed.

For the Russian paratroopers, Spetsnaz, tank crews, and naval infantry, who imagined themselves *la crème de la crème*, that initial failure became hundreds of days of mortal reality. Day after day, fellow soldiers kept dying in a losing war.

Even worse, the Putin-driven mythology of modern Russia describes Ukrainians as members of a non-existent nation, as sub-Russians who have taken a misconceived historical path and must be returned to the fold by their Slavic superiors. The only one outcome of this special military operation (Ukrainians did not deserve the backhanded compliment of a real war) was a decisive Ukrainian defeat.

More than 200 days have passed since the failed Hostomel airfield attack, 200-plus days when very little has worked as Russia imagined. Russian units have not been rotated, so that if you, a Russian soldier, entered the war on February 24, you are still fighting. Numerous of your comrades have been killed or wounded.

For 200 days, Russian soldiers have seen vehicles explode, Russian corpses along the roads, an imploding logistic chain, and uncertainty about when a drone will hit you or call down an artillery strike. These experiences have only escalated in recent weeks as precision HIMARS and MLRS strikes create great balls of fire on the horizon in the middle of the night, and where you, as a Russian soldier, know that dozens of your comrades just died.

Some Russian units have taken massive losses. The General Staff of the Ukrainian Armed Forces estimates, for example, that the Russian 810th Naval Infantry Brigade has lost 85% of its declared strength at the outset of war. Even if the unit still exists, it is now maybe at half-strength, with only one in three soldiers from the original unit. Russian elite units are now rag-tag third-rate units, hauling obsolete equipment. Russia's modern weaponry had been destroyed or captured in vast quantities, (including the loss of around 1,100 tanks), and in parts of the front, is barely able to defend itself.

Experienced and trained units become a mishmash of replacements and scrambled equipment. When the war dragged out, and the fight started to become urban, such as in Mariupol and Severodonetsk, Russia lacked infantry, and VDV, Spetsnaz, naval infantry, and even police units; OMON, a gendarmerie

force, had to fill the role. These units were used as *ersatz* infantry, with the wrong equipment, vulnerable vehicles, and tactics that amplified the already high casualty rates — and suffered the inevitable consequence of death by incompetence.

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This author applies his “Six-day War Rule”, based on the 1967 war between Israel (which was under-prepared and lacked enough hardware) and neighboring Arab countries, which states: “You can stink as a warfighter, but as long as your enemy is even worse, you still prevail.” The Ukrainians are not perfectly organized and do not always use the best tactics, but Russian military performance is much worse. The Ukrainians therefore prevail.

So Ukraine’s strategy of corrosion has exhausted Russian grit, spirit, and morale, and inflicted massive material losses. It might be even better as a strategy of erosion, as it removes the underpinnings of the Russian authoritarian regime — its authority.

News commentaries, opinion pieces, and editorials tend to focus on the bigger picture. These outlets discuss the clash between political systems, the force ratio, and differences in macroeconomics, and seek to understand the leader’s intent.

But the soldier’s view is much more personal —seeing a continuous stream of fellow soldiers die or suffer wounds for months on end; ordered to launch futile attacks the Ukrainians repel; suffering strikes from modern Western weapons with unprecedented effects when you least expect it; daily witnessing spirals of smoke from knocked out tanks, vehicles; barely any company commanders left alive along the front, while more senior officers worrying about HIMARS attacks hide in shelters far from the front; intermittent starvation due to a failed logistic chain; and on top of all this, a national leader in denial.

These developments compound one another. A significant number of Russian units have now lost the will to fight (as on the Kharkiv front), placing greater pressure on those with a continuing *esprit de corps*, and ultimately paving the way for Russian defeat.

It doesn’t matter whether Russia has lost 1,500 or 500 tanks; what matters is when Russian troops lose the will to fight. As units start to disintegrate, their

casualties soar; Nazi Germany's casualties on the Eastern front skyrocketed after the fall of 1943, when they lost the initiative and beaten units with intermittent supply and coordination straggled back towards the River Oder and Berlin. Ukraine's current dual counteroffensive matters because it once again signals to Russian soldiers that their cause is lost, that there is no successful endgame, and that there is only pain and death in front of them.

Putin's grip over Russia is sliding away in slow motion, a drip-drip of authority that increases with every tank turret blasted into the Ukrainian sky. For an authoritarian regime, this is a disaster, and brings nearer the day when the military loses its fear of ignoring or disobeying orders, ceases to fight, and instead trains its disillusioned eyes on the man in the Kremlin who made this mess.

Jan Kallberg, Ph.D., LL.M., is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Mathematical Sciences at the United States Military Academy and a Scientist in the Insider Threat Research program. He is also a Non-resident Senior Fellow with the Transatlantic Defense and Security program at the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA). Follow him at cyberdefense.com and @Cyberdefensecom. The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the United States Military Academy or the Department of Defense.

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