

The Ukrainian Army Is Unprepared for War

Written by David R. Marples

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DAVID R. MARPLES, JUL 16 2017

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The recent news in Ukraine, from the perspective of the government side, has been very positive. At least 60 settlements have been recaptured from the anti-Kyiv forces led by the Russian officers Igor Girkin/Strelkov and Vladimir Antyufeyev; they are now confined to two small pockets inside the two regional capitals of Donetsk and Luhansk. They are well provided with weaponry but desperate for a full-scale Russian invasion to begin. This picture, however, masks fundamental problems at the upper levels of the Ukrainian army. Evidence is emerging of large-scale corruption among generals and lower-ranking officers, particularly in Ukraine's Ministry of Defence. It is undermining the war effort and lowering the morale of the rank-and-file. Many soldiers have come to the conclusion that it would be better to change the leadership in Kyiv before dealing with the separatists in Donbas. Command over troops in the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) is divided among several sectors, including the ministries of Defence and Internal Affairs, along with some volunteer formations. Arsen Avakov, Minister of Internal Affairs, announced on 29 July that at least 20,000 troops in Donbas were needed to replace deserters and traitors. Almost 600 troops had been found collaborating with officials of the self-styled Donetsk People's Republic (DNR). A further 242 people who had been on vacation 'for a long time' were also under investigation.

After months of fighting, the border with Russia still remains open. Anton Herashchenko, an adviser to Avakov, notes that daily, hundreds, and sometimes thousands of mercenaries cross from Russia to join the fighting in Ukraine. Some are influenced by Russian state propaganda, but others come as mercenaries. Some Ukrainian soldiers suspect that the border has remained open because some of their own leaders are making profits from the hiring of Russian troops and equipment.

One soldier (we have withheld his name) complained that ATO generals were ignorant of what is taking place on the war zone. They prefer to sit in hotels well away from the battlefield, 'eating lobster' and cavorting with prostitutes. They remain restricted to the 'Soviet mindset.' Oleh Lyashko, Leader of the Radical Party, had visited them and provided biscuits, chocolate, food, and sleeping bags, but the commanders had confiscated them and put such goods under lock and key. He quoted a border source that said Russia was prepared to pay \$100,000 for a truck loaded with weapons to cross the frontier, and \$10,000 for an individual mercenary. These funds fall into the hands of Ukrainian military leaders. The war, in his view, could be ended in a month using two battalions with twenty snipers in each, but people at the top are more interested in prolonging it.

Parents of soldiers from Uzhhorod region complain of corrupt and irresponsible military commanders. About 280 soldiers were picked up at Luhansk airport and informed that their destination would be the Moscow-Luhansk highway, a virtual death sentence, since the road is the only remaining link between eastern Ukraine and Russia and controlled by separatists and Chechens. The troops abandoned their mission; only 25 paratroopers from Zhytomyr were willing to take it on and suffered heavily. The Uzhhorod parents believe their Ukrainian commanders betrayed their whereabouts to the Chechens for cash, and took vacations on the proceeds. Captured Chechens have also

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been suddenly released. The soldiers do not complain about shortages of food and water, and are willing to defend Ukraine. But they believe also that the war is being prolonged for profits.

According to Dmitriy Tymchuk, coordinator of the group 'Information Resistance', the main problem lies with army generals at ATO Headquarters. They are, he reports, pathologically inclined to lies, are afraid to take on the slightest responsibility, unable to make simple decisions, and utterly incompetent. Military commanders of all units are psychologically unprepared for combat. Starting with the war in Crimea (March 2014), examples abound of middle and junior commanders refusing to obey orders or sabotaging them.

Treachery and corruption at the top is rampant. Both Oleh Tiahnybok, leader of Svoboda party, and Serhii Melnychuk, commander of the Aidar battalion, maintain there are traitors in the central office of the ATO. Tiahnybok has proposed a lie detector test to prevent the delivery of secret information to Moscow, end corruption, and facilitate the delivery of necessary military equipment. A volunteer from the 'Wings of the Phoenix' from Mykolaiv region complained that, 'The generals have saunas and fitness centres in the rear of ATO Staff. They have no idea what's going on here, where our guys are dying'.

One soldier bemoaned the fact that in Kyiv the oligarchs have returned to power and 'nothing has changed.' The generals do not care about soldiers; they remain in hotels, secure comfortable positions, and are content to replace dead troops with.[1] Even Ukrainian Minister of Defence, Valerii Heletei, acknowledged the depths of the problems of the high command, noting that the Ukrainian army has 20-30 generals who are quite adept at preparing battle plans on tablets and on paper, but they have no idea what is happening at the Front. In order to understand the situation, he commented, 'one should at least go there'.

Igor Strelkov, the DNR's defence leader, recently imposed martial law in Donetsk. Such options are not open to the Ukrainian side, complained Ihor Lutsenko, Deputy of the Kyiv Council. Yet, he believes, its imposition would allow the military to detain suspected separatists. The Front abounds in enemy agents and traitors, yet local police forces leave the separatists in peace. Lutsenko maintained that: 'The main problems with fighting the terrorists are located in the capital; and to overcome them will automatically ensure victory – at least over those enemies who are in our country right now. The ATO must start in Kyiv!'

In the 2014 state budget, the government of Ukraine proposes to allot about \$1 billion for the ATO, the costs of refugees, and restoring the cities of Donetsk and Luhansk. It has also raised financial assistance to the families of dead servicemen in the ATO zone to around \$50,000 per soldier. In reality, however, families do not receive such compensation since the soldiers are blamed for their own deaths – failure to follow instructions, misuse of weapons, improper behaviour, etc., as the testimonies of their widows reveals.

The failure to deal with fundamental problems of the army is undermining the war effort and alienating the troops conducting the main fighting. Not only does it endanger the future of Ukraine, but also it contributes to volunteer extremist paramilitary groups like the Azov battalion, taking over the war effort.[2] The victims of high-level corruption in the current Ukrainian army are the rank-and-file troops who are neglected, betrayed, and often abandoned to their fate as cannon fodder. This fact is largely concealed in the Ukrainian and Western media amid reports of ATO successes and the liberation of eastern towns and villages. But it will affect the future of Ukraine long after the demise of Igor Strelkov and the so-called People's Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk.

Notes

**Co-authored with Myroslava Uniat*

[1] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9DVsAEIpdNc>

[2] See, for example, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-28329329>

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About the author:

David R. Marples is a Research Analyst in the Contemporary Ukraine Program, Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies and Distinguished Professor of Russian and East European History at the University of Alberta. His books include *Understanding Ukraine and Belarus: A Memoir* (2020), *Ukraine in Conflict* (2017), *'Our Glorious Past': Lukashenka's Belarus and the Great Patriotic War* (2014), *Russia in the 20th Century: The Quest for Stability* (2011), and *Heroes and Villains: Creating National History in Contemporary Ukraine* (2007).