**Why is the Russian Army Still Fighting in Ukraine?**

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By virtually every measure, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has been a disaster. Vladimir Putin’s expectation that his army would quickly capture Kyiv by the end of February 2022 and Ukraine would have to capitulate could not have been more incorrect. And it only got worse for Moscow.

The invasion stalled. Russian forces were savaged. Over the next seventeen months, Ukraine has clawed back all the territory Russia had captured and a bit more. Reportedly, the major part of Ukraine’s offensive began this past weekend.

Russian commanders proved incompetent. Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and military chief Valery Gerasimov are topping the list. Two of the more able generals were relieved for criticizing the failure of the high command. Air Force Chief Sergei Surovikin was removed as the overall commander and has disappeared from public view. General Ivan Popov, commander of the 58th Combined Arms Army, was next.

The extraordinary and temporary defection of Yvgenny Prigozhin and his march on Moscow to protest what he believed was dereliction of duty by Shoigu and Gerasimov remains inexplicable. Prigozhin was not punished for his action. That he turned up at a Russo-Africa conference in St. Petersburg with Putin and now is in Belarus piles more confusion onto this command chaos.

Despite Ukrainian courage, is there a breaking point for both sides?

According to the British Ministry of Defense, the Russian Army has sustained at least 200,000 casualties. Some estimates claim 100,000 of its soldiers may have been killed. Admiral Sir Tony Radakin, the UK Defense Chief, told Parliament last month that Russia’s military capability has been cut in half.

The Russian Army lacks non-commissioned officers. Stories of abuse and corruption are legion. Too many enlisted men were deprived of basic weapons, equipment and even food stolen and sold by their senior officers. So why does the Russian army continue to fight in Ukraine no matter how poorly?

History offers insights on when militaries can no longer function that apply to all armies. In December 1944 the German Wehrmacht launched the Battle of the Bulge initially overwhelming the allies. Supreme Commander General Dwight David Eisenhower feared a collapse of his troops.

Over 100,000 American troops were AWOL. Severe combat losses of junior officers and senior non-commissioned officers crippled small unit leadership. Fortunately, the bad weather lifted, the army held and the German offensive was defeated as allied airpower dominated the battlefield.

By 1972-73, the Vietnam War had taken its toll on the US military. Morale and readiness across much of the US military were deplorable. Drug use was widespread especially in Vietnam.

Many US soldiers avoided or refused going into combat in essence refusing to fight. The worst practice was “fragging.” Fragging was tossing a hand grenade into a bunker or a tent to kill or badly wound a superior. Over 1000 incidents were reported.

That said, despite the hardships, the Russian Army is still mounting a defense against the Ukrainian offensive. Perhaps at some point, the Russian Army could collapse as Ike worried his army might. However, Russian persistence and endurance are not to be dismissed.

Russian history is filled with absorbing great punishment under dire conditions. World War II and twenty-million dead Russians make this clear. Coming from Leningrad where his family endured and survived the horrors of the Nazi attacks, Putin understands this is part of Russian DNA.

Militaries are hierarchies. In an autocracy such as Russia’s the chain of command is even more disciplined by fear. The brutal history of the GRU, KGB and other police organizations is one of inducing fear in order to impose discipline. Most Russian units have political officers to enforce discipline.

Patriotism and propaganda should not be discounted. Moscow portrays this as a war for survival. Ukraine and the West are enemies of Russia. Propaganda identifies “Neo-Nazis” in Ukraine as the threat to Russia who must be eliminated.

The power of this campaign of disinformation, misinformation and blatant lies should not be underestimated. Soldiers believe this, sadly even Americans. Otherwise, why did the US continue to fight for so long in Afghanistan and Iraq?

As in the Battle of the Bulge, casualties to officers and senior enlisted on both sides in Ukraine matter. Both the Russian and Ukrainian armies face exhaustion due to heavy losses. But Ukraine’s economy and its civilians are also targets. Despite Ukrainian courage, is there a breaking point for both sides? Will the West provide enough support and aid to sustain Ukraine’s losses? On that the outcome of the war will rest if the Russians doggedly continue to fight.

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