

Russia's Military Performance Doesn't Match the Propaganda

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American government and media statements have led the public to believe that the Russian military has been shockingly ineffective and there should be confident optimism for a Ukrainian victory. Ukrainians have indeed fought courageously and performed above expectation. But there has been a vast gulf between private and public assessments. Recent leaks have confirmed what has long been suggested: there is a need to re-evaluate the performance of the Russian army and to recalibrate the optimistic expectations.

The ridiculing and mocking of the Russian military has been possible only because of a deliberate self-delusion that demanded turning away from two important admissions.

First, in the three quarters of a century since the United States became the world's dominant power, it has seldom decisively won a war or fully achieved its explicit policy goal for going to war. Honestly evaluating Russia's military performance requires comparing it to the exemplar of recent American wars. The United States has consistently failed to defeat armies far more ragtag than the modern Ukrainian Armed Forces.

Since Vietnam, the United States has failed to achieve its military and political goals in Afghanistan, Iraq, or Libya. After twenty years of fighting in Afghanistan, the U.S. was forced to withdraw. They were in disarray; the Taliban is back in power. The United States has twice withdrawn from Iraq because their government refused to capitulate to Status of Forces Agreements. The first withdrawal left Saddam Hussein in power; the second removed him and left Iran (not the U.S.) strengthened in Iraq. The war in Libya left a failed state to bleed weapons into extremist movements throughout North Africa. In none of these wars did the United States leave victorious nor with their foreign policy objectives achieved. Each of them left a government in power that was not pro-American. The war in Syria has also left Bashar al-Assad in power.

If the Russian military has fared badly against the modern Ukrainian army, it has fared no

worse than the United States has against much less modern adversaries.

The second point is the reason why Russia is fighting such a modern Ukrainian army. Ukraine has become a [de facto member of NATO](#). The United States and its NATO allies are providing everything but the bodies in the war against Russia, which is not only pulling off this level of performance against Ukraine: it is pulling off this level of performance against the combined resources of NATO. The United States and its NATO allies have provided and maintained the weapons, trained the Ukrainian soldiers to use them, and provided the intelligence on where to target them. The U.S. is providing “[stepped up feeds of intelligence](#) about the position of Russian forces, highlighting weaknesses in the Russian lines.” The U.S. has essentially assumed planning, conducting [war-games](#), and “[suggesting](#)” which “avenues...were likely to be more successful.” In March, the U.S. hosted members of the Ukrainian military at an American military base in Germany for [war games to strategize](#) for the next phase of the war. In April, they “held [tabletop exercises](#) with Ukrainian military leaders to demonstrate how different offensive scenarios could play out” in the expected counter offensive, for which the U.S. has “worked” with Ukraine “in terms of their surprise,” according to General Christopher Cavoli.

But even though Russia is facing an enhanced Ukrainian military, recent leaks confirm what private assessments have long suggested: Ukraine’s losses have been understated while its prospects have been overstated, and Russia’s losses have been overstated while its achievements have been understated.

Long before the recent leaks revealed that many more Ukrainian soldiers than Russian soldiers have been killed or wounded on the battlefield, that Ukraine will be [out of antiaircraft missiles](#) by early May, that they are short of troops and ammunition and their counteroffensive will fall “[well short](#)” of its goals, attaining, at best, only “modest territorial gains,” U.S. generals and government officials had been quietly admitting as much.

In February, *The Washington Post* reported that [privately](#) the U.S. intelligence’s “sobering assessment” that retaking Crimea “is beyond the capability of Ukraine’s army” has been “reiterated to multiple committees on Capitol Hill over the last several weeks.” As early as November, 2022, U.S. officials [shared](#) that assessment with Ukraine, suggesting they “start thinking about [their] realistic demands and priorities for negotiations, including a reconsideration of its stated aim for Ukraine to regain Crimea.” That same month, western military analysts began to warn of an “inflection point” at which Ukraine’s battlefield gains were at an apex. And on January 21, 2023, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley [said](#) publicly that Ukraine would not be able to retake all of its territory.

But it was not only that Ukraine’s ambitions had been inflated and their prospects overstated. Their losses had also been understated. Despite public claims of parity in losses or worse for Russia, the leaked reports of a much higher ratio of Ukrainian deaths and casualties to Russian deaths and casualties had been forecasted by military analysts who frequently put the ratio of soldiers killed at closer to 7:1 or 10:1 Ukrainian versus Russian losses. *Der Spiegel* has [reported](#) that German intelligence is “alarmed” by the “high losses suffered by the Ukrainian army” in the battle for Bakhmut. They told German politicians in a secret meeting that the loss of life for Ukrainian soldiers is in “three-digit number[s]” every day on that battleground alone. *The Washington Post* has [reported](#) that the most highly trained and experienced Ukrainian soldiers are “all dead or wounded.”

And it is not only Ukrainian losses that may have been understated. Russian losses, ineptitude, and material setbacks may have been just as overstated. After suffering high casualties at the beginning of the war, Alexander Hill, professor of military history at the University of Calgary, says Russia began to pursue a more methodical battlefield strategy and lowered their losses.

On April 26, General Cavoli, the commander of United States European Command and Supreme Allied Commander Europe, gave a congressional audience of the U.S. House Armed Services Committee a report that is very different from what they'd been told just a month earlier. The public is constantly told that Putin is throwing his soldiers into a meatgrinder. General Mark Milley recently reported that Russian troops are "getting slaughtered." He told the House Armed Services Committee in late March, "It's a slaughter-fest for the Russians. They're getting hammered in the vicinity of Bakhmut."

But in April, General Cavoli [told](#) that same body,

"The Russian ground force has been degenerated somewhat by this conflict; although it is bigger today than it was at the beginning of the conflict." And it is not only the ground force. Cavoli went on to report, "The air force has lost very little: they've lost eighty planes. They have another one thousand fighters and fighter bombers. The navy has lost one ship."

And as for the larger Russian military, Cavoli said,

"Much of the Russian military has not been affected negatively by this conflict...despite all of the efforts they've undertaken inside Ukraine."

Historian Geoffrey Roberts, an authority on Soviet military history, told me:

"Russia's Armed Forces have made many mistakes and suffered severe setbacks during the course of its war with Ukraine and NATO, but overall it has performed very well. Like the Red Army during the Second World War, the Russian military has shown itself to be a resilient, adaptable, creative, and highly effective learning organization—a modern war-making machine whose lessons and experience—positive and negative—will be studied by General Staffs and military academies for generations to come."

After initial territorial setbacks, the Ukrainian military countered with two shocking victories in Kharkiv and Kherson provinces. But in each of those cases, Russia seems to have either decided to leave or redeployed, offering little defense. Military analyst and ret. Lt. Col. Daniel L. Davis has [pointed out](#) that in each situation where the Russian military "chose to stand and fight, Ukraine has not defeated them." Russia has not lost a battle it has chosen to fight.

Since then, the Russian military has settled itself in Bakhmut where, like death's maw, it has devoured everyone Kiev has sent in to displace it. A Ukrainian commander in Bakhmut has [said](#) that "the exchange rate of trading our lives for theirs favors the Russians. If this goes on like this, we could run out." Daniel Davis has [pointed out](#) that, even if Ukraine were to launch and win a counteroffensive, the rate of casualties and deaths would be so high, they would "have spent [their] last remaining force with which to conduct offensives" or future operations. Military historian Geoffrey Roberts recently [told](#) an interviewer, "if the war continues for much longer, I am worried that Ukraine will collapse as a state."

Professor Hill [argued](#) in November 2022 that “had Zelensky’s Ukrainian government been willing to negotiate back in April [2022] then the eventual outcome on the ground would probably have ended up being better for Ukraine than is likely to be the case today or in the future.” It’s a prognosis, he told me, that still stands.

The Ukrainian military may have performed above expectation, and the Russian military may have performed below expectation. But recent statements, both leaked and on the record, suggest the need for an updated, more sincere evaluation. Russia is not struggling only against the Ukrainian Armed Forces: they are struggling against a military seriously swollen by NATO resources, training, and planning. And even still, they are faring no worse than the U.S. military has fared against much less equipped, trained, and prepared forces over the past several decades. The dismissive mocking of the Russian military has been helped by underestimating Ukrainian losses, overestimating Ukrainian capabilities, and by overestimating Russian losses and degeneration and underestimating Russian capabilities and achievements.

Both senior U.S. military leadership and major western media must begin reassessing the Russian military and its capabilities for what they are, instead of how narratives wish them to be.

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