Russian army, in WW2 and Ukraine

Victor Nekrasov

by Lev Tsitrin

One of my culture shocks after coming to the US was to be called a "Russian." The Americans derive nationality from the place one was born in; in my native Soviet Union, to be designated a "Russian" meant something altogether different. The word had a very special connotation – that of a privileged ethnicity. It was a shortcut for having no problem getting accepted into a prestigious school, or given a managerial position. It meant an automatic welcome into the Communist party, this ladder for career growth. In USSR, being a Russian meant "being privileged" – so when someone with a "Jew" in the ethnicity line of the Soviet passport was called a "Russian," it sounded outright weird.

It seems to me that the same cultural habit of conflating nationality with ethnicity makes us miss one of the key points of the Ukraine war. Russian military tactics in Ukraine, along with the acceptance of mass casualties in the name of military success are routinely compared to (and contrasted with) the way the Russian army fought in WW2, for instance.

And yet, in one key aspect, the Russians who fought in the WW2 were very different from the Russians fighting in Ukraine.

Consider the classic of Soviet war literature, Victor Nekrasov's "*In the Trenches of Stalingrad.*" (Nekrasov was quite a character – a thorn in the side of the Soviet authorities, he was not a dissident per se, but something worse – a genuine *enfant terrible*. A central figure in Kiev's literary scene, an alcoholic and a genuinely committed Communist, he naturally and innocently did things that drove the higher-ups crazy, and yet remained naively bewildered at why what he did was considered wrong – like consorting with the likes of Andrey Sakharov (whose first trip after marrying a fellow-dissident Elena Bonner was to see Nekrasov in Kiev); or addressing an unsanctioned public gathering that commemorated the Nazi massacre of the Kiev Jewry in Baba Yar (for doing which, his party membership was suspended for "daring to have a personal opinion that diverged from that of the Party" – yes, that's an actual quote); or keeping and lending out to his innumerable friends "samizdat" – the uncensored literature; or saying mindbogglingly outrageous things (a friend accompanying him at a Moscow airport recorded with amazement how he pointed a finger at a huge mural of Lenin, saying with disgust, "O how I hate this man!") Long story short, the Soviets made him emigrate, and he ended up traveling around the world, broadcasting his thoughts on Paris' radio Liberty.)

But, before all that, there was his autobiographical novel that instantly made him famous, and – upon getting awarded the Stalin prize, apparently at Stalin's personal request – became

a classic. The narrative turns on four main protagonists: Captain Kerzhentsev (who was Nekrasov's alter ego); his orderly, private Valega, a quiet, hardworking, highly efficient, and utterly indispensable eighteen-year old hunter from the Altai mountains; Lieutenant Farber – shy, tall, lanky, clumsy, bespectacled, absent-minded, reflective, and deeply introverted; and a commander of an intelligence squad by the name of Chumak – unruly, rough, dashing, risk-taking, swashbuckling – and a highly efficient killer (his original in life was Nekrasov's bosom friend Ivan Fischenko).

That was a microcosm of the WW2 Russian army – two ethnic Russians, a Jew, and a Ukrainian, very different men committed to the same goal, all tenaciously fighting alongside each other against the common enemy they all hated with a passion.

Fast-forward eighty years, into the present Russian army. The Kerzhentsev and the Valega types remain, though deeply uncertain of the purpose of the fight; the Farbers have largely left, years ago, for Israel and for the US; and the Chumaks are fighting – but fighting against the Kerzhentsevs and the Valegas, not alongside them.

That's quite a difference. When talking of the "Russian" army of WW2, one talks of the army that included Ukrainians; today's "Russian" army excludes them. Does this difference affect the way the "Russian army" fights? Does it turn it into a different force?

That's possible. The daredevils like Chumak do make a difference – and in fact, the difference they make is rather obvious from the way this war is progressing. It appears that an army that includes the Ukrainians is very different from the one that excludes them. This is why it is a totally different kind of war for the Russians – because the "Russians" of the WW2 army included the Ukrainians. Minus Chumak, Nekrasov's "*In the Trenches of Stalingrad*" would have been a much lesser thriller; minus the actual Fischenko types,

the outcome of the battle for Stalingrad might have been different.

So I wonder whether the absence of the likes of Chumak/Fischenko from the present-day Russian army is one of the reasons it got bogged down – especially when those same Fischenkos are fighting from the opposite trenches. Is that the reason the best-laid plans for “a special military operation” with quick and bloodless victory went awry, it having turned into a bloody quagmire?