

The Possible Victory of Ukraine

Ukrainian gains in Kharkiv counter-offensive



by Conrad Black

The Ukraine–Russian war, which has been an unending source of surprises since it was impetuously launched by Russian President Vladimir Putin in February, has taken another decisive turn as the long-awaited Ukrainian counteroffensive

has severely defeated overexposed Russian forces.

Although the Kremlin and the Russian Defense Ministry have been comparatively silent, the very active and opinionated Russian military blogging community, supplemented by a great many intercepted signals between Russian field officers, presents a picture bordering on a Russian debacle.

It now appears that the authentic Ukrainian counterattack in the south, designed to ensure that Russia didn't succeed in cutting Ukraine off from the world by occupying its entire Black Sea coastline, was in some measure a decoy operation to induce the Russians to transfer reinforcements from the eastern Donbas region to support their offensive along the Black Sea coast. It seems that substantial forces were redeployed to the south, and a very well-planned and swift offensive propelled by the latest NATO equipment came as a complete surprise in the east and has shattered many Russian units and seized immense quantities of munitions, military vehicles, and many Russian prisoners of war.

Ethnic Russians are the majority in eastern Ukraine and are presumably somewhat less offended by the Russian military assault on Ukraine than the 85 percent majority of Ukrainians who are not of Russian ancestry. Russian military units had been largely stripped of artillery and their ranks thinned, leaving the flanks of many units unprotected. The Ukrainians exploited this condition, and the Russian defenses are widely claimed to have "buckled." There's ample evidence that the Russian invasion army is suffering from poor morale, poor training and command decisions, an obsolete, distant, command structure, and a general lack of familiarity with the requirements of intense ground combat that's understandable in an army that hasn't engaged in a serious conventional war since the arrival of Stalin's Red Army in Berlin in May 1945.

It's more obvious every week how serious an error Putin made when he plunged into Ukraine in February with only 150,000

combat soldiers assigned the mission of reintegrating into Russia the disheveled nation of Ukraine, of somewhat more than 40 million people. He was undertaking a military operation as great as that of Hitler's offensive in the West in May 1940 that the German army for that operation had more than 10 times as many combat soldiers, and the German Wehrmacht had been trained to an almost perfect state of competence and was commanded by legendarily capable generals, including Erich von Manstein, Erwin Rommel, and Heinz Guderian. The defenders had no significant resupply in the course of what's known to history as the Battle of France, and the Germans had heavy air superiority, other than over the English Channel during the evacuation of 338,000 Allied soldiers from Dunkirk.

None of this bears any comparison to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which as all the world has noticed, was based on the mistaken supposition that there would be no serious resistance, that millions of Ukrainians were longing to be regathered into the jurisdiction of the Kremlin, and presumably that there would be a tepid and pusillanimous response from the West. Of course, all of these suppositions were horribly wrong.

Ukraine, which has never in its history really been a distinct country, having been composed of successive occupations of its territory by Lithuanians, Poles, Russians, and medieval Tatars, has now made for itself a heroic tradition, a gallant war of independence of the kind that will furnish it an authentic mythos that can sustain and inspire a patriotic tradition for a new nation, even one created by an ancient people.

It's true, as has been pointed at by a number of commentators, that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is far from a perfect democrat, has seized dictatorial powers that customarily are asserted by a government at war, and that he was not popular within his country prior to the outbreak of war. It's also true that his background as a successful

professional comedian is, to say the least, unusual for a successful war leader. None of that has the slightest relevance now. He has been a brilliant galvanizer of Ukrainian national determination, and an extremely skillful solicitor of assistance from the international community.

On the other side, the Russian Internet community of military commentators is extremely reproachful of Putin and his defense minister Sergei Shoigu, and of the Russian general staff and command generally. The Ukrainians loudly advertise that Russian prisoners of war will be very respectfully treated, and the Russian desertion rates imply that many find that a more alluring way-station in their lives than the assignment to try to resist the very well-armed and ferociously motivated Ukrainian defense of a homeland that was supposed to rejoice at the arrival of Russian liberators seven months ago.

The Russians appear to have taken approximately 80,000 casualties, the equivalent of about 200,000 casualties in the United States, with absolutely nothing to show for it. And as Russia, with a GDP smaller than Canada's, is footing the bill for all of this against Ukraine, almost all of whose costs of equipment and munitions are an outright gift from NATO, 70 percent of that from the United States, this war is becoming extremely onerous for Russia. The only way for them actually to win a serious victory will be a general mobilization and a patriotic epic on the scale of the repulse of Napoleon and of Hitler: a regime of sacrifice that the Russian masses are little disposed to sustain and the current discredited leadership lacks the moral authority to impose.

It's certainly time that sniping media commentators, such as the normally reasonably sensible Tucker Carlson of Fox News, stopped comparing American military assistance with the endless combat roles of Americans in the Middle East, and praising Russia. This assistance generates no American casualties, and if Russia had succeeded in re-occupying Ukraine, it would have substantially undone the democratic

world's victory in the Cold War, and it would have convinced much of the world that the United States and the free world in general, were in irreversible decline. It would also have been tremendously demoralizing to Western Europe, and although Ukraine isn't a member of NATO, it would probably have sounded the death knell of that alliance.

After a defeatist start, this could be the first large-scale success of the Biden administration. But its ambition shouldn't be a bone-crushing humiliation for Russia; it should work toward an honest referendum in the Russian-speaking areas of Ukraine, including Crimea, to determine if any of them wish to join Russia voluntarily, and an emergent Ukraine that should have eventual access to the European Union, and though not a member of NATO, a country whose borders are solemnly and believably guaranteed by NATO and by Russia.

This is potentially and imminently the greatest advance for the forces of democracy since the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the collapse of international communism 30 years ago. Isolationist media shouldn't dare to heckle and impugn such courage in the cause of freedom, and of the strategic security of the West.

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