

Russia Regains Tactical Momentum

Description

by Scott Ritter via [RT.com](https://www.rt.com)

Excerpt

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Some harsh truths

As the military operation in Ukraine enters its third month, some harsh truths have emerged which are altering how both the Russian armed forces and modern warfare will be assessed going forward. Few analysts — including this author — expected serious resistance to last more than a month. Indeed, General Milley had [briefed](#) Congress during closed-door briefings in early February that a full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine could result in the fall of Kiev within 72 hours.

There were several reasons for such an assessment. First and foremost was the extensive preparation that had been conducted by Russia in advance of the military incursion. The movement of hundreds of thousands of troops along with their equipment and the logistical means to sustain both men and material in combat is not a trivial exercise, and Russia had been engaged in military drills which stretched out over the course of several months, perfecting such logistics. The Russian military is led by officers who excel in staff work and preparation, and to assume that they had planned for every possibility that could be encountered on the battlefield is not an outlandish proposition.

Doctrinally, the Russian military was configured for the kind of warfare it had prepared for, where its overwhelming advantages in mass and firepower were optimized to produce the very battlefield results anticipated by most observers — the destruction of enemy defenses in depth with massed fire, followed by an aggressive armored assault that penetrated deep into the enemy rear areas, sowing confusion and disruption leading to the rapid loss of combat effectiveness on the part of those being attacked.

A Russian-Ukrainian war was always going to be primarily a ground war; neither the Ukrainian Air Force nor its Navy was expected to put up a sustained, viable resistance to their Russian counterparts. While the Ukrainian Army had been trained and equipped as a virtual NATO proxy force since 2015, the reality was that it had [undergone](#) a rapid expansion from 2014, when it could field some 6,000 combat-ready troops, to its pre-military operation composition of some 150,000 soldiers organized into 24 brigades. The expectation that Ukraine would be able to perfect anything more than basic battalion-sized combined arms operations (i.e., the coordinated employment of maneuver forces with artillery and air support) was wishful thinking.

While Ukraine had placed a great deal of effort in transitioning from an all-conscript military in 2014 to one where some 60% of its combat personnel were professional contract soldiers led by seasoned non-commissioned officers, one cannot create such a force in so short of time. Small unit leadership of the sort that represents the glue that holds a military force together under the strain and duress of

sustained combat simply had not had enough time to take hold and mature in the Ukrainian army, leading many to assess that it would fold when placed under the stress of Russian doctrinal warfare.

The following analysis is sourced from publicly-available reporting by journalists embedded with the Russian military and the forces of the Donetsk People's Republic, as well as Russian Ministry of Defense briefings and statements made by the Ukrainian side.

Within the first week of the Russian operation getting underway, it was clear to most that many of the assumptions that had been made were flawed and/or misplaced. First and foremost, Moscow had opted not to employ its forces according to standard doctrine, opting instead to take a light approach, which appeared to be born from a concerted effort to minimize civilian casualties and harm to civilian infrastructure that itself was derived from a fundamental misunderstanding of the reality of the situation on the ground in Ukraine.

The [reported purging of 150 officers](#) from the 5th Department of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), responsible for operations in the so-called 'near abroad' (which includes Ukraine), along with the arrest of Sergei Beseda, the former head of the department, suggests that Russia had suffered a failure of intelligence the likes of which has not been seen since the Israeli failure to predict the Egyptian crossing of the Suez Canal during the Yom Kippur War of October 1973.

While the Russian government has remained characteristically tight-lipped about any possible shortcomings regarding the work of the 5th Department prior to the start of the military operation, the statements by Russian leadership suggesting that the Ukrainian military might remain in its barracks and that civilian leadership would not interfere with Russia military operations suggest that these assumptions were made using intelligence provided by the 5th Department. That such assumptions, if indeed they were made, proved to be so fundamentally off target, when combined with the preparedness of the Ukrainian military to engage the initial columns of Russian forces, suggests that the work of the 5th Department had been disrupted by Ukrainian security services, who took control of Russian human networks and fed false reports back to the Russian leadership.

The fact is that columns of Russian troops, advancing boldly into Ukraine without the kind of attention to route security and flank protection that would normally accompany offensive operations, found themselves cut off and annihilated by well-prepared Ukrainian ambushes. Moreover, instead of folding under pressure, the Ukrainian Army — both regular and those from the territorial forces — stood their ground and fought, using hand-held anti-tank weapons— US-made Javelins and British-made NLAWs— to great effect. It was, to use an American colloquialism, a Turkey shoot, and the Ukrainian government made effective use of combat footage obtained from such encounters to great effect in shaping global public opinion about the effectiveness of Ukraine's defenses.

However, the limitations of the Ukrainian armed forces did not allow it to turn its impressive tactical victories into positive operational and strategic outcomes. Despite costly initial setbacks, the Russian Army pressed home its attack, achieving impressive gains in the south, where Russian forces operating out of Crimea secured the strategic city of Kherson and advanced on the equally important city of Mariupol. There, they joined with Russian and allied forces from the Donetsk Republic to surround the Ukrainian forces defending Mariupol, eventually trapping the survivors, numbering several thousand strong, in the reinforced concrete underworld of the Azovstal steel factory. Further north, Russian forces, together with the forces of the Donetsk and Lugansk republics, advanced westward to drive Ukrainian forces from their prepared defenses to gain control of the totality of the territory

encompassing the Donbass region.

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