



First Fact-Based MSM Report About War in Ukraine! Newsweek: 'Putin Minimizing Civilian Casualties'

Description

UKRAINE: As destructive as the Ukraine war is, **Russia is causing less damage and killing fewer civilians than it could**, U.S. intelligence experts say.

Russia's conduct in the brutal war tells a different story than the widely accepted view that Vladimir Putin is intent on demolishing Ukraine and inflicting maximum civilian damage — and it reveals the Russian leader's strategic balancing act. If Russia were more intentionally destructive, the clamoring for U.S. and NATO intervention would be louder. And if Russia were all-in, Putin might find himself with no way out. Instead, his goal is to take enough territory on the ground to have something to negotiate with, while putting the government of Ukraine in a position where they have to negotiate.

Understanding the thinking behind Russia's limited attacks could help map a path towards peace, experts say.

In nearly a month since Russia invaded, dozens of Ukrainian cities and towns have fallen, and the fight over the country's largest cities continues. United Nations human rights specialists say that some 900 civilians have died in the fighting (U.S. intelligence [puts that number](#) at least five times UN estimates). About 6.5 million Ukrainians have also become internally displaced (15 percent of the entire population), half of them leaving the country to find safety.

"The destruction is massive," a senior analyst working at the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) tells *Newsweek*, "especially when compared with what Europeans and Americans are used to seeing."

But, the analyst says, the damage associated with a contested ground war involving peer opponents shouldn't blind people to what is really happening. (The analyst requested anonymity in order to speak about classified matters.) **"The heart of Kyiv has barely been touched. And almost all of the long-range strikes have been aimed at military targets."**

In the capital, most observable to the west, Kyiv city authorities say that some 55 buildings have been damaged and that 222 people have died since February 24. **It is a city of 2.8 million people.**

“We need to understand Russia’s actual conduct,” says a retired Air Force officer, a lawyer by training who has been involved in approving targets for U.S. fights in Iraq and Afghanistan. The officer currently works as an analyst with a large military contractor advising the Pentagon and was granted anonymity in order to speak candidly.

“If we merely convince ourselves that Russia is bombing indiscriminately, or [that] it is failing to inflict more harm because its personnel are not up to the task or because it is technically inept, then we are not seeing the real conflict.”

In the analyst’s view, though the war has led to unprecedented destruction in the south and east, **the Russian military has actually been showing restraint in its long-range attacks.**

As of the past weekend, in 24 days of conflict, **Russia has flown some 1,400 strike sorties and delivered almost 1,000 missiles** (by contrast, the United States flew [more sorties and delivered more weapons](#) in the first day of the 2003 Iraq war). **The vast majority of the airstrikes are over the battlefield, with Russian aircraft providing “close air support” to ground forces. The remainder — less than 20 percent, according to U.S. experts — has been aimed at military airfields, barracks and supporting depots.**

A proportion of those strikes have damaged and destroyed civilian structures and killed and injured innocent civilians, **but the level of death and destruction is low compared to Russia’s capacity.**

“I know it’s hard ... to swallow that the carnage and destruction could be much worse than it is,” says the DIA analyst. “But **that’s what the facts show. This suggests to me, at least, that** Putin is not intentionally attacking civilians, **that perhaps he is mindful that he needs to limit damage** in order to leave an out for negotiations.”

Russia began its invasion of Ukraine on February 24 with an air and missile attack targeted against some 65 airfields and military installations. On the first night, at least 11 airfields were attacked. Some 50 additional military installations and air defense sites were hit, including 18 early-warning radar facilities.

In these initial salvos, a total of some 240 weapons were expended, including 166 air-, ground-, and sea-based missiles. Though there were a good number of longer-range bombers (flying from Russian soil), most of the airstrikes were shorter-range and most of the missiles launched were also short-range types of the Iskander (NATO SS-26 Stone) and Tochka (NATO SS-21 Scarab) classes.

The breadth of the attack — north to south, east to west — led many observers to compare the opening bombardment to a pattern seen in U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, where large salvos concentrating on air defenses and airfields had the intent of establishing air superiority, a shock strike that would then open the skies for follow-on bombing at will. When it came to Ukraine, **not only did many observers “mirror-image” Russian objectives to match U.S. practices, they also made premature (and incorrect) observations that Russia was fighting such a conflict.**

Even before Russian ground forces reached Kyiv and other cities, this narrative goes, the air and missile forces would have so damaged Ukraine — including its communications and other infrastructure needed for defenses to continue working — that it would secure victory on the ground. Russia has not achieved any of these goals.

Though the outlines of its first night of strikes suggested an air superiority campaign and an intense and focused destruction of Ukraine's military, after a month of war, continued targeting tells a different story. Russia still hasn't completely knocked out the Ukrainian air force, nor has it established air superiority. **Airfields away from the battlefield are mostly still operable and some (in major cities) haven't been bombed at all. The fabric of communications in the country continues to operate intact. There has been no methodical Russian attack on transportation routes or bridges to impede Ukrainian ground defenses or supplies. Though electrical power plants have been hit, they are all in contested territory or near military installations and deployments. None have been intentionally targeted.**

In fact, there has been no methodical bombing campaign to achieve any systemic outcome of a strategic nature. **Air and missile strikes, which initially seemed to tell one story, have almost exclusively been in direct support of ground forces.**

"Think of the Russian Air force as flying artillery," says the retired senior U.S. Air Force officer, who communicated with *Newsweek* via email. **"It's not an independent arm. It has undertaken no strategic air campaign as American observers might be used to from the last 30 years of American conflict."**

Ukrainian air defenses, both fixed and mobile missiles, have proven resilient and deadly.

"The Air Defense's survivability and efficacy have surprised many, not only in Kyiv, but also across the country," Kyiv-based military expert Oleg Zhdanov told the *Kyiv Independent*.

Ukrainian military reporter Illia Ponomarenko [says](#) that the air defense system defending Kyiv from aircraft and missiles "has been particularly effective.

"Most missiles targeting the city are successfully intercepted," Ponomarenko says.

Russia did not bomb stationary air defense emplacements protecting cities. U.S. analysts say Putin's generals were particularly reluctant to attack urban targets in Kyiv.

As a result, regardless of the Kremlin's plans — whether Russia was actually seeking air superiority or intended to limit damage in Kyiv — there is no question that Putin has had to revise the long-range attack plan.

Over the course of almost four weeks, missiles fired at Kyiv have been scarce. Ukrainian media have reported just more than a dozen incidents involving Russian cruise and ballistic missiles intercepted over the city and its closest suburbs since February 24. And all of them, U.S. experts say, have been clearly headed for legitimate military targets.

"The fact that the mobile S-300 SAM systems are still operating is a powerful indictment of Russia's ability to conduct dynamic or time-sensitive targeting," the Atlantic Council asserted this week in a

military brief.

The DIA analyst disagrees: “For whatever reason, clearly the Russians have been reluctant to strike inside the urban megalopolis of Kyiv.

“Yes they might not be up to the U.S. task [in dynamic targeting] or in establishing air superiority ... But this is the Russian air force, subordinate to the ground forces. And this war is different: it’s being fought on the ground, where everything strategic that Russia might destroy in front of its forces — bridges, communications, airfields, etc. — also becomes unusable to them as they move forward.”

From the very beginning of air strikes, both U.S. analysts agree, some of the limited air and missile attacks have also had some internal logic. Take, for instance, the airfield at Hostomel, northwest of Kyiv. It wasn’t directly attacked because Russia initially used it to land paratroopers, with the hope of advancing to the capital city. Instead the airfield and the surrounding countryside became the scene of a major battle, as Ukrainian forces mounted a fierce defense.

In the south, Kherson airport also wasn’t attacked. The reason has become clear: **Russia is now using that very airfield to stage its own forces.**

In Kyiv, only one of the major airports was struck, in Boryspil. The news media reported that the “international airport” was hit, **but the dual civil-military airfield is also home to Ukraine Air Force’s 15th Transport Wing**, including the presidential Tu-134 jet that might have been used by Ukrainian President Zelensky if he chose to evacuate. **The other major civilian Kyiv airport, Zhulyany, has never been attacked. Nor have two civil airports in Kharkiv (Ukraine’s second largest city) been attacked.**

Russia started the war with some 300 combat aircraft in Belarus and western Russia within range of Ukraine. Those and other aircraft pulled into the war have been flying about 80 strike sorties (individual flights) daily. Ukraine claims that 95 of those Russian aircraft have been lost, either shot down by air defenders or due to human error and technical problems. (Russia has moved additional aircraft from other bases to replenish most of its losses.)

The strikes inside major cities (Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Odessa) have not only been limited, but the retired U.S. Air Force officer points out that **even when long-range aviation — Russian Tu-95 “Bear” bombers delivering cruise and hypersonic missiles — have flown strikes in western Ukraine, away from the battlefield**, they have been directed at military targets.

And there has been strategic logic, at least in Russia’s view.

“They’ve been signaling,” the retired officer says. **“Western airfields [at Lutsk, L’viv, and Ivano-Frankivsk] were hit because they were the most likely steppingstones for donated fighter aircraft coming in from Poland and eastern European countries.** When those targets were prepped,” he adds, “there was also talk of a western no-fly zone where those [western] airfields might have been essential.

“And **the so-called peacekeeper training ground [in Yaroviv] was hit because it was the place where the ‘international legion’ was to have trained,**” the officer says. “Moscow even announced that.”

Russia, the DIA analyst adds, has also been careful not to cause escalation onto Belorussian or Russian territory, or to provoke NATO. Despite operating from Belarus, Russian ground and air operations have mostly been confined to the southeastern portion of the country. And **the attacks in western Ukraine have been careful to avoid NATO airspace.** For example, the Ukrainian airbase at Lutsk, home to the 204th Aviation Wing and just 70 miles south of Belarus, was attacked March 13th by long-range bombers. The missiles were launched from the south, from over the Black Sea.

None of this is to suggest that Russia is not at fault in its invasion, or that the destruction and the civilian deaths, injuries and dislocation aren’t due to its aggression. Evidence on the battlefield, where there has been grinding fight for territory — in Kharkiv, in the contested front line towns like Mariupol, Mikolaiiv, and Sumy in the east; and Chernihiv northeast of Kyiv — indicates that **civilian deaths have been much higher where ground forces are operating.**

Even though the majority of Russian airstrikes have taken place in these areas, the increased civilian harm is due to the use of artillery and multiple rocket launchers, not Russian air or long-range missile strikes.

“People are talking about Grozny [in Chechnya] and Aleppo [in Syria], and the razing of Ukrainian cities,” a second retired U.S. Air Force senior officer tells *Newsweek*. “But even in the case of southern cities, where artillery and rockets are within range of populated centers, the strikes seem to be trying to target Ukrainian military units, many of which by necessity operating from inside urban areas.”

The officer requested anonymity because he is being privately briefed on the war by the Pentagon and is not authorized to speak to the news media.

He and the other analysts who spoke to *Newsweek* argue not only that the destruction is only a small fraction of what is possible, but also that they see a glimmer of hope in a fact-based analysis of what Russia has done.

“I was initially puzzled as to why more long-range missiles haven’t been sent into Kyiv and other major cities such as Odesa, and also why long-range aviation hasn’t been used more in strategic attacks,” says the second senior officer. “But then I had to shift to see the war through [Vladimir] Putin’s eyes.”

“Caught with his pants down, perhaps Putin indeed pivoted after he realized that Ukraine wasn’t going to be a cakewalk and that Kyiv wasn’t conquerable. Maybe he decided to solely focus on taking territory along the periphery and linking up his consolidations in the south, to be in a position to hold enough territory to extract concessions from Ukraine and the west — security guarantees or some demilitarized zone.”

The second senior officer says that Putin obviously continues to apply pressure against Kyiv, but Russia hasn’t shifted much of its own forces and has continued to back off bombing in the city proper.

“In that, maybe he is leaving room for a political settlement,” the officer says.

Sunday, Volodymyr Zelensky told CNN he is prepared to talk to the Russian president. “I’m ready for negotiations with him. I was ready for the last two years. And I think that without negotiations, we cannot end this war,” said Zelensky.

The fact that both sides are talking, experts say, indicates not only how shocked they are by the destructiveness of a land war in Europe, but are also stymied in achieving their military objectives. As Russia advances, it is running out of supplies. Its forces are also exhausted. As Ukraine continues its valiant defense, it too is reaching the limits of human endurance, facing major losses and running low on ammunition.

It is now absolutely clear, all U.S. observers agree, that Putin and his generals overestimated their own military prowess while grossly underestimating Ukraine’s defenses.

“I’m frustrated by the current narrative — that Russia is intentionally targeting civilians, that it is demolishing cities, and that Putin doesn’t care. Such a distorted view stands in the way of finding an end before true disaster hits or the war spreads to the rest of Europe,” the second U.S. Air Force officer says.

Heartbreaking images make it easy for the news to focus on the war’s damage to buildings and lives. **But in proportion to the intensity of the fighting (or Russia’s capacity), things could indeed be much worse.**

“I know that the news keeps repeating that Putin is targeting civilians, but there is no evidence that Russia is intentionally doing so,” says the DIA analyst. “In fact, I’d say that **Russia could be killing thousands more civilians if it wanted to.**”

“I’m no com-symp,” the analyst says. “Russia is dead wrong, and Putin needs to be punished. But in terms of concluding the war in a way that both sides can accept and where we don’t see Armageddon, the air and missile war provides positive signs.”

Every war is unique and awful, and Ukraine is no different. But Russia’s choice to modulate its destructiveness is an important counterintuitive element. Vladimir Putin can’t easily win; he can’t accept loss or retreat; and he can’t escalate. He has to keep destruction and pressure at a very careful, just-bad-enough level to keep some advantage.

“I know it’s thin consolation that it could be a lot worse,” the DIA analyst says, “but to understand how that is the case should really change people’s perspectives, even inside the U.S. government, as to how to end this.”

by William M. Arkin

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