



## Has Russia Really Lost the War in Ukraine?

### Description

There has been much ink spilled chronicling the many Russian military blunders and failures over the past year – and there has been no shortage of genuine examples to highlight. Concurrently, there has been even more eagerness to laud the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF) for their tenacity and battlefield successes – and plenty of genuine examples to cite. The net result in Western media has been a clear impression that Ukraine will eventually prevail.

## A Sober Assessment of the War Between Russia and Ukraine

A sober, unemotional, and balanced assessment of the war, however, reveals the situation is likely far more perilous for Kyiv than is commonly believed. Given recent comments by Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, U.S. Gen. Mark Milley, however, many may be forgiven for thinking a Ukrainian victory is inevitable. On Tuesday the general said that “Russia has lost” the war already. Putin’s forces have, he flatly declared, “lost strategically, operationally, and tactically.”

Beyond the understandable desire in the United States to demonize Russia and sanctify Ukraine, the overall reality of the war at the one-year mark is much more complex.

When Putin ordered his forces to illegally invade Ukraine on February 24 last year, many believed ([myself included](#)) that Russia’s superior firepower, years of reported military modernization, and larger force would defeat the UAF in a few months or even weeks. The Ukrainian military, which had spent eight years building defensive positions and perfecting strategies designed to inflict high casualties on a Russian invasion, proved fierce and tenacious in effectively fighting from multi-layered defensive positions.

What few foresaw was that in the decade prior to the outbreak of war, Russian modernization and military reform had been mostly a sham, hiding a tactically deficient, operationally inadequate force – even from its top leaders, including Putin. They had built a “Potemkin” military that looked good on the outside but was full of rot on the inside. That rot was evident in the opening rounds of the war at the tactical level but was fully revealed in September when Ukraine launched two successful counterattacks, one in Kharkiv province and one in Kherson province.

Russia had been focused for months on the Kherson attack, and initially thwarted Ukraine’s attack. But while Putin’s forces were focused on Kherson, Commander of the UAF Gen. Valerii Zaluzhnyi secretly built up forces in the Kharkiv region and overwhelmed a badly outnumbered Russian force, seizing thousands of square kilometers of territory back. In desperation, Russia diverted reserves to stem the tide in Kharkiv – which made their troops in Kherson suddenly vulnerable.

Russian commander of forces in Ukraine, Gen. Sergey Surovikin, made the controversial decision to abandon Kherson city without a fight, move his forces to the east side of the Dnipro River, blow the bridges to prevent the UAF from following him, and live to fight another day. This he successfully did by mid-November. In fact, the Russian decision to withdraw from Kherson without a fight (and the similar decision to withdraw from Kyiv and Kharkiv early in the war), highlights the different strategies taken by each side through the war’s first year, and may have a real impact on the fighting in 2023.

Since April of last year, Russian General Staff appears to have prioritized fighting for objectives or cities for which they calculate they have a reasonable chance of winning. When the Russians believe the cost of attacking or defending a given site is higher than the potential gain, they have demonstrated a willingness to abandon the battle and reposition forces elsewhere. Putin’s forces did that by withdrawing from Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Kherson in 2022. Ukraine, in contrast, appears to have adopted the concept of defending every inch of its territory, no matter the cost.

This tendency was first observed in the city of Mariupol in which the Ukrainian General Staff refused to withdraw, even when it became clear holding the city was untenable. Thousands of Ukrainian troops were ultimately killed, wounded, or captured. Similar dynamics played out last summer when Ukrainian troops fought to the last in Severodonetsk, Lysychansk, and recently in Soledar.

In each city, the UAF refused to withdraw. In each case, they fought valiantly and bravely, but sacrificed enormous numbers of troops killed and wounded, eventually losing the cities as well. A similar dynamic is presently playing out in Bahkmut, as Ukrainian troops continue refusing to withdraw, even as Russian forces get closer to closing off the last remaining road supplying the city. As Ukrainian and Western leaders discuss potential spring offensives for the UAF, the battle performances in 2022 highlight a little-discussed trend that should worry Kyiv.

Ukrainian forces have been successful in pushing back Russian forces three times in the war thus far: the [April withdrawal](#) of Putin’s armor from Kyiv and Kharkiv, the September rout of [Russians in Kharkiv](#), and the [November withdrawal of Surovikin’s troops](#) from Kherson city. In each case, Russia redeployed and established new lines of defense in order to prioritize attacking in other zones. But in those areas where the Russian General Staff chose to stand and fight, Ukraine has not defeated them: Mariupol, Severodonetsk, Lysychansk, Soledar, and likely soon Bahkmut.

## What Happens Next?

If Ukraine harbors any hopes of driving Russia out of the Donbas or of launching an offensive to take Melitopol, they will have to do something they have thus far not done in this war: force Russia out of the territory for which it has chosen to stand and fight for. That is a tall task. Clearly, much new weaponry has been promised by the West and will begin showing up in numbers this April and May. But Russia, too, continues to expand its forces and equipment.

Anything in war is possible, and in time Russian troops may get worn down faster than the UAF. But Ukraine faces unenviable difficulties and we must be clear-eyed about the prospects for Zelensky's troops in 2023. There is likewise no guarantee Russia will defeat the Ukrainian army, but Gen. Milley's claim that "Russia has lost" the war already is far from the truth.

by Daniel L. Davis

### Category

1. Army-Wars-Conflict Zones-Military Tech.
2. Main

### Date Created

02/19/2023