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The Kiev Junta's Military Debacle in East Ukraine

By Alexander Mercouris

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Following the publicized estimations that the true fatality rate of the junta's army during the "anti terrorist operation" may have been in the region of 8,000 to 12,000, a number of important points can be made:

1. These figures are of course unverified. However they do not look unreasonable to me in light of Poroshenko's admission that the Ukraine lost during the ATO something like 65% of its armoured vehicles. It seems the Ukrainian airforce has also been essentially annihilated. Certainly it has ceased to be a presence in recent weeks.

2. Assuming that the figures are true then the Ukraine has just been witness to a slaughter unprecedented in any European country since the end of the Second World War. It bears saying that the fighting only achieved full intensity following the fall of Sloviansk on 5th July 2014. The fighting around Slavyansk in May and June was of a lesser intensity. It is surely the case therefore that the bulk of the losses the Ukraine suffered were accounted for by the fighting that took place after Slavyansk fell on 5th July 2014. In other words it is likely that between 8,000 to 12,000 Ukrainian troops were killed in a period of around 2 months from 5th July 2014 until the announcement of the ceasefire on 5th September 2014. If so this would mean the Ukraine was

losing during this period men at a rate of roughly 129 to 190 a day. Nothing comparable has happened in Europe since the German surrender on 9th May 1945.



Image: A loss rate of anything more than 5% in a combat action is more than a unit can be reasonably expected to bear and that anything above that figure would render the unit inoperable.

3. Another way of looking at the scale of these losses would be to consider what proportion they make up of the Ukrainian force involved in the ATO. Most of the figures I have heard put the size of that force in the region of 60-80,000 men. If the estimate for dead of 8,000 to 12,000 is anywhere near the truth then between a tenth (10%) and a fifth (20%) of this force may now be dead. The reality would surely in fact be worse since it is a certainty that a disproportionate share of the dead would be front line combat soldiers who would account for only a part of the force involved in the ATO. A large proportion of the total of 60-80,000 men in the force involved in the ATO would be support and logistics troops who would be expected to come out more lightly. I once read that a loss rate of anything more than 5% in a combat action is more than a unit can be reasonably expected to bear and that anything above that figure would render the unit inoperable. If the figures of 8,000 to 12,000 are anywhere close to the truth then this figure of 5% has been exceeded in which case the Ukrainian army has ceased to exist as an effective force.

4. I would just also say that it is clear to me that the vast bulk of Ukrainian losses are made up of troops from the regular army. It was obvious to me during the fighting that the various right wing paramilitary units rarely fought in the front line but were used to terrorise people in the rear.

5. The question then is how did such a debacle happen? Even if the 8,000 to 12,000 loss figure is an exaggeration one still has to account for the loss of 65% of the Ukrainian military's armoured vehicles. Claims that the Ukrainians had to fight the Russian regular army are clearly not true so an explanation for the debacle clearly does not lie there.

6. Firstly it needs to be said that we are not looking here at any lack of courage or determination on the part of the Ukrainian troops. This was not a collapse such as the one experienced by the Iraqi army fighting ISIS in which soldiers led by their officers simply turned tail and ran. Rather it is a case of an army that was bled to death over weeks of appalling attrition during the summer months. The fact that the casualties may be so high suggests no lack of discipline or courage on the part of the troops. On the contrary they suggest extraordinary discipline and courage on the part of troops sent into the meat grinder by their commanders in a way that to a Briton like me

carries uncomfortable echoes of the Somme. Claims that were made back in February and March that the Ukrainian military had been so run down by Yanukovitch that it for all practical purposes had ceased to exist are on the evidence of what happened in July and August simply untrue. I strongly doubt by the way that soldiers from any west European country would today be able to go on fighting for so long if they were suffering losses on this sort of scale.

7. I think the explanation for this debacle is quite simply the disastrous leadership provided by the junta.

8. It is clear that after the junta ceased power in February the Ukraine's professional military leadership was no longer trusted. Instead operational control of the ATO seems to have been given to psychopathic amateurs like Parubiy, Yarosh, Avakov and Lyashko. Following the key Security Council meeting of 30th June 2014 that decided to resume the offensive, General Kovalov ("Koval"), the junta's then defence minister, who was at least a professional soldier, either resigned or more probably was dismissed (supposedly he was transferred to a new post after which he seems to have disappeared). Probably he objected to the resumption of the offensive. With him gone control of the army passed to people like Parubiy, Avakov & co who have no knowledge of war. They were joined by Geletei, the new defence minister, who is a security official rather than a soldier. Having no understanding of war or knowledge of military command these people then spent the rest of the summer hurling the Ukrainian army to its destruction by repeatedly attacking NAF positions whilst indiscriminately shelling residential areas and getting their Nazi thugs to murder and terrorise civilians. To make matters even worse, as a further indication of their ignorance and arrogance, they chose to fight the war by the calendar, setting themselves an arbitrary deadline of Ukrainian Independence Day on 24th August 2014 to win it by.

9. By contrast the NAF at some point clearly acquired a proper professional military leadership with a proper staff and headquarters consisting apparently of retired staff officers from Moscow who set up headquarters in the eastern town of Krasnodon on the Russian border. We know very little about these people but Strelkov has indirectly admitted that one of the reasons for his dismissal was to make way for a more professional military leadership, that could not be provided by himself as he is not a trained soldier. This could refer to the people in Krasnodon. They for their part seem to have fought a classic Soviet style defensive battle, relying on cities like Donetsk and Lugansk to provide a barrier behind which an armoured reserve capable of taking offensive action was built up. A fair parallel (though obviously one fought on an immeasurably greater scale) might be the battle of Kursk.

That at least is my take on the disastrous course of the ATO. Of course it should never have been launched at all. That it was launched was criminal. So however on my reading was its conduct, both towards the civilians it so indiscriminately slaughtered, and towards the hapless Ukrainian soldiers it sent to the slaughter. Anyone who pretends to real Ukrainian patriotism ought at this time to be condemning not Putin and the Russians but those who to the accompaniment of inane cries of "Glory to Ukraine" are responsible for sending so many of the Ukraine's sons to their deaths.