The Russian Invasion of Ukraine

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Part II: The mental and moral realms
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When considered as purely physical phenomena, the operations conducted by Russian ground forces in Ukraine in 2022 present a puzzling picture. In the north of Ukraine, Russian battalion tactical groups overran a great deal of territory but made no attempts to convert temporary occupation into permanent possession. Indeed, after spending five weeks in that region, they left as rapidly as they had arrived. In the south, the similarly rapid entry of Russian ground forces led to the establishment of Russian garrisons and the planting of Russian political, economic, and cultural institutions. In the third theater of the war, rapid movements of the type that characterized Russian operations on the northern and southern fronts rarely occurred. Instead, Russian formations in eastern Ukraine conducted artillery-intensive assaults to capture relatively small pieces of ground.

One way to shed a little light upon this conundrum is to treat Russian operations on each of the three major fronts of the war as a distinct campaign. Further illumination is provided by the realization that each of these campaigns followed a model that had been part of the Russian operational repertoire for a very long time. Such a scheme, however, fails to explain why the Russian leadership applied particular models to particular sets of operations. Resolving that question requires an examination of the mental and moral purposes served by each of these three campaigns.

Raids in the North

American Marines have long used the term "raid" to describe an enterprise in which a small force moves swiftly to a particular location, completes a discrete mission, and withdraws as quickly as it can.[1] To Russian soldiers, however, the linguistic cousin of that word (*reyd*) carries a somewhat different meaning. Where the travel performed by the team conducting a raid is nothing more than a means of reaching particular points on the map, the movement of the frequently larger forces conducting a *reyd* creates significant operational effects. That is, in the course of moving along various highways and byways, they confuse enemy commanders, disrupt enemy logistics, and deprive enemy governments of the legitimacy that comes from uncontested control of their own territory. Similarly, where each phase of a present-day American raid necessarily follows a detailed script, a *reyd* is a more open-ended enterprise that can be adjusted to exploit new opportunities, avoid new dangers, or serve new purposes.

The term *reyd* found its way into the Russian military lexicon in the late 19th century by theorists who noted the similarities between the independent cavalry operations of

the American Civil War and the already well-established Russian practice of sending mobile columns, often composed of Cossacks, on extended excursions through enemy territory.[2] An early example of such excursions is provided by the exploits of the column led by Alexander Chernyshev during the Napoleonic Wars. In September of 1813, this force of some 2,300 horsemen and two light field guns made a 400-mile circuit through enemy territory. At the middle point of this bold enterprise, this column occupied, for two days, the city of Kassel, then serving as the capital of one of the satellite states of the French Empire. Fear of a repetition of this embarrassment convinced Napoleon to detail two army corps to garrison Dresden, then the seat of government of another one of his dependencies.[3] As a result, when Napoleon encountered the combined forces of his enemies at the Battle of Leipzig, his already outnumbered *Grande Armée* was much smaller than it would otherwise have been.

In 2022, the many battalion tactical groups that moved deeply into northern Ukraine during the first few days of the Russian invasion made no attempt to re-enact the occupation of Leipzig. Rather, they bypassed all of the larger cities in their path and, on the rare occasions when they found themselves in a smaller city, occupation rarely lasted for more than a few hours. Nonetheless, the fast-moving Russian columns created, on a much larger scale, an effect similar to the one that resulted from Chernyshev's raid of 1813. That is, they convinced the Ukrainians to weaken their main field army, then fighting in the Donbass region, to bolster the defenses of distant cities.

Rapid Occupation in the South

In terms of speed and distance traveled, Russian operations in the area between the southern seacoast of Ukraine and the Dnipro River resembled the raids conducted in the north. They differed, however, in the handling of cities. Where Russian columns on either side of Kyiv avoided large urban areas whenever they could, their counterparts in the south took permanent possession of comparable cities. In some instances, such as the ship-to-objective maneuver that began in the Sea of Azov and ended in Melitopol, the conquest of cities took place during the first few days of the Russian invasion. In others, such as the town of Skadovsk, the Russians waited several weeks before seizing areas and engaging local defense forces they had ignored during their initial advance.

In the immediate aftermath of their arrival, the Russian commanders who took charge of urban areas in the south followed the same policy as their counterparts in the north. That is, they allowed the local representatives of the Ukrainian state to perform their duties and, in many instances, to continue to fly the flag of their country on public buildings.[4] It was not long, however, before Russian civil servants took control of the local government, replaced the flags on buildings, and set in motion the replacement of Ukrainian institutions, whether banks or cell phone companies, with Russian ones.[5]

Like the model of the *reyd*, the paradigm of campaigns that combined rapid military occupation with thoroughgoing political transformation had been part of the Russian

military culture for quite some time. Thus, when explaining the concept for operations on the southern front, Russian commanders were able to point to any one of a number of similar enterprises conducted by the Soviet state in the four decades that followed the Soviet occupation of eastern Poland in 1939. (These included the conquest of the countries of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in 1940; the suppression of reformist governments in Hungary and Czechoslovakia during the Cold War, and the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.)[6]

While some Russian formations in the south consolidated control over conquered territory, others conducted raids in the vicinity of the city of Mykolaiv. Like their larger counterparts on the northern front, these encouraged the Ukrainian leadership to devote to the defense of cities forces that might otherwise have been used in the fight for the Donbass region. (In this instance, the cities in question included the ports of Mykolaiv and Odessa.) At the same time, the raids in the northern portion of the southern front created a broad "no man's land" between areas that had been occupied by Russian forces and those entirely under the control of the Ukrainian government.
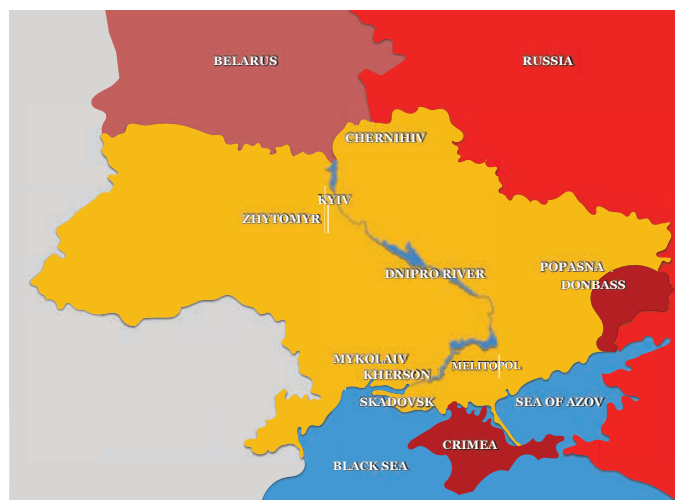
Ukraine and the surrounding area of interest. (Photo provided by author.)

Stalingrad in the East

Russian operations in the north and south of Ukraine made very little use of field artillery. This was partially a matter of logistics. (Whether raiding in the north or rapidly occupying in the south, the Russian columns lacked the means to bring up large numbers of shells and rockets.) The absence of cannonades in those campaigns, however, had more to do with ends than means. In the north, Russian reluctance to conduct bombardments stemmed from a desire to avoid antagonizing the local people, nearly all of whom, for reasons of language and ethnicity, tended to support the Ukrainian state. In the south, the Russian policy of avoiding the use of field artillery served the similarly political purpose of preserving the lives and property of communities in which many people identified as "Russian" and many more spoke Russian as their native language.

In the east, however, the Russians conducted bombardments that, in terms of both duration and intensity, rivaled those of the great artillery contests of the world wars of the twentieth century. Made possible by short, secure, and extraordinarily redundant supply lines, these bombardments served three purposes. First, they confined Ukrainian troops into their fortifications, depriving them of the ability to do anything other than remain in place. Second, they inflicted a large number of casualties, whether physical or caused by the psychological effects of imprisonment, impotence, and proximity to large numbers of earth-shaking explosions. Third, when conducted for a sufficient period of time, which was often measured in weeks, the bombardment of a given fortification invariably resulted in either the withdrawal of its defenders or their surrender.

We can glean some sense of the scale of the Russian bombardments in the east of Ukraine by comparing the struggle for the town of Popasna (18 March-7 May 2022) with the battle of Iwo Jima (19 February-26 March 1945.) At Iwo Jima, American Marines fought for five weeks to annihilate the defenders of eight square miles of skillfully fortified ground. At Popasna, Russian gunners bombarded trench systems built into the ridges and ravines of a comparable area for eight weeks before the Ukrainian leadership decided to withdraw its forces from the town.

The capture of real estate by artillery, in turn, contributed to the creation of the encirclements that Russians call "cauldrons" (*kotly*). Like so much in Russian military theory, this concept builds upon an idea borrowed from the German tradition of maneuver warfare: the "battle cauldron" (*Schlachtkessel*.) However, where the Germans sought to create and exploit their cauldrons as quickly as possible, Russian cauldrons could be either rapid and surprising or slow and seemingly inevitable. Indeed, the successful Soviet offensives of the Second World War, such as the one that resulted in the destruction of the German Sixth Army at Stalingrad, made extensive use of cauldrons of both types.

Freedom from the desire to create cauldrons as quickly as possible relieved the Russians fighting in eastern Ukraine from the need to hold any particular piece of ground. Thus, when faced with a determined Ukrainian attack, the Russians often withdrew their tank and infantry units from the contested terrain. In this way, they both reduced danger to their own troops and created situations, however brief, in which the Ukrainian attackers faced Russian shells and rockets without the benefit of shelter. To put things another way, the Russians viewed such "encore bombardments" not merely as an acceptable use of ordnance but also as opportunities to inflict additional casualties while engaging in "conspicuous consumption" of artillery ammunition.

In the spring of 1917, German forces on the Western Front used comparable tactics to create situations in which French troops advancing down the rear slopes of recently captured ridges were caught in the open by the fire of field artillery and machineguns. The effect of this experience on French morale was such that infantrymen in fifty French divisions engaged in acts of "collective indiscipline," the motto for which was, "we will hold, but we refuse to attack."[7] (In May of 2022, several videos appeared on the internet in which people claiming to be Ukrainian soldiers fighting in the Donbass region explained that, while they were willing to defend their positions, they had resolved to disobey any orders that called for them to advance.)

Resolving the Paradox

In the early days of the maneuver warfare debate, maneuverists often presented their preferred philosophy as the logical opposite of "firepower/attrition warfare." Indeed, as late as 2013, the anonymous authors of the "Attritionist Letters" used this dichotomy as a framework for their critique of practices at odds with the spirit of maneuver warfare. In the Russian campaigns in Ukraine, however, a set of operations made mostly of movement complemented one composed chiefly of cannonades.

One way to resolve this apparent paradox is to characterize the raids of the first five weeks of the war as a grand deception that, while working little in the way of direct destruction, made possible the subsequent attrition of the Ukrainian armed forces. In particular, the threat posed by the raids delayed the movement of Ukrainian forces into the main theater of the war until the Russians had deployed

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the artillery units, secured the transporting network, and accumulated the stocks of ammunition needed to conduct a long series of big bombardments. This delay also ensured that, when the Ukrainians did deploy additional formations to the Donbass region, the movement of such forces, and the supplies needed to sustain them, had been rendered much more difficult by the ruin wrought upon the Ukrainian rail network by long-range guided missiles. In other words, the Russians conducted a brief campaign of maneuver in the north in order to set the stage for a longer, and, ultimately, more important, campaign of attrition in the east.

The stark contrast between the types of warfare waged by Russian forces in different parts of Ukraine reinforced the message at the heart of Russian information operations. From the start, Russian propaganda insisted that the "special military operation" in Ukraine served three purposes: the protection of the two pro-Russian protostates, "demilitarization," and "denazification." All three of these goals required the infliction of heavy losses upon Ukrainian formations

fighting in the Donbass. None, however, depended upon the occupation of parts of Ukraine where the vast majority of people spoke the Ukrainian language, embraced a Ukrainian ethnic identity, and supported the Ukrainian state. Indeed, the sustained occupation of such places by Russian forces would have supported the proposition that Russia was trying to conquer all of Ukraine.

The Russian campaign in the south served direct political aims. That is, it served to incorporate territories inhabited by a large number of ethnic Russians into the "Russian World." At the same time, the rapid occupation of cities like Kherson and Melitopol enhanced the deceptive power of operations conducted in the north by suggesting the possibility that the columns on either side of Kyiv might attempt to do the same to cities like Chernihiv and Zhytomyr. Similarly, the raids conducted north of Kherson raised the possibility that the Russians might attempt the occupation of additional cities, the most important of which was Odessa.[8]

Guided Missiles

The Russian program of guided missile strikes, conducted in parallel to the three ground campaigns, created a number of moral effects favorable to the Russian war effort. The most important of these resulted from the avoidance of collateral damage that resulted, not only from the extraordinary precision of the weapons used but also from the judicious choice of targets. Thus, Russia's enemies found it hard to characterize strikes against fuel and ammunition depots, which were necessarily located at some distance from places where civilians lived and worked, as anything other than attacks on military installations.

Likewise, the Russian effort to disrupt traffic on the Ukrainian rail system could have included attacks against the power generating stations that provide electricity to both civilian communities and trains. Such attacks, however, would have resulted in much loss of life among the people working in those plants as well a great deal of suffering in places deprived of power. Instead, the Russians chose to direct their missiles at traction substations, the remotely located transformers that converted electricity from the general grid into forms used to move trains.[9]

There were times, however, when missile strikes against "dual use" facilities gave the impression that the Russians had, in fact, targeted purely civilian facilities. The most egregious example of such a mistake was the attack, carried out on 1 March 2022, upon the main television tower in Kyiv. Whether or not there was any truth in the Russian claim that the tower had been used for military purposes, the attack on an iconic structure that had long been associated with a purely civilian purpose did much to reduce the advantages achieved by the overall Russian policy of limiting missile strikes to obvious military targets.[10]

The Challenge

The three ground campaigns conducted by the Russians in Ukraine in 2022 owed much to traditional models. At the same time, the program of missile strikes exploited a capability that was nothing short of revolutionary. Whether new or old, however, these component efforts were conducted in a way that demonstrated profound appreciation of all three realms in which wars are waged. That is, the Russians rarely forgot that, in addition to being a physical struggle, war is both a mental contest and a moral argument.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine may mark the start of a new cold war, a "long twilight struggle" comparable to the one that ended with the collapse of the Soviet Empire more than three decades ago. If that is the case, then we will face an adversary who, while drawing much of value from the Soviet military tradition, has been liberated from both the brutality inherent in the legacy of Lenin and the blinders imposed by Marxism. What would be even worse, we may find ourselves fighting disciples of John R. Boyd.

Notes

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCWP 3-43.1, Raid Operations,* (Washington, DC: 1993).

2. For the adoption of the concept of the "raid" by the Russian Army of the late nineteenth century, see Karl Kraft von Hohenlohe-Ingelfingen (Neville Lloyd Walford, translator), *Letters on Cavalry,* (London: E. Stanford, 1893); and Frederick Chenevix Trench, *Cavalry in Modern Wars,* (London: Keegan, Paul, Trench, and Company, 1884).

3. For a brief account of this *reyd*, which was led by Alexander Chernyshev, see Michael Adams, *Napoleon and Russia,* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006).

4. John Reed and Polina Ivanova, "Residents of Ukraine's Fallen Cities Regroup under Russian Occupation," *The Financial Times,* (March 2022), available at https://www.ft.com.

5. Adam Taylor, "Shift to Ruble in Kherson Fuels Concerns about Russia's Aims in Occupied Region," *The Washington Post,* (May 2022), available at https://www.washingtonpost.com.

5. David M. Glantz, "Excerpts on Soviet 1938–40 Operations from *The History of Warfare, Military Art, and Military Science*, a 1977 Textbook of the Military Academy of the General Staff of the USSR Armed Forces," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies,* (Milton Park: Routledge, March 1993).

6. The classic work on the French mutinies of 1917 is Richard M. Watt, *Dare Call it Treason,* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1963).

7. Michael Schwirtz, "Anxiety Grows in Odessa as Russians Advance in Southern Ukraine," *The New York Times,* (March 2022), available at https://www.nytimes.com.

8. Staff, "Russia Bombs Five Railway Stations in Central and Western Ukraine," *The Guardian,* (April 2022), available at https://www.theguardian.com.

9. For an example of the many stories that characterized the 1 March 2022 television tower strike as an attack on civilian infrastructure, see Abraham Mashie, "US Air Force Discusses Tactics with Ukrainian Air Force as Russian Advance Stalls," *Air Force Magazine,* (March 2022), available at https://www.airforcemag.com.