



Ukraine's Battle at Ilovaisk, August 2014: The Tyranny of Means

By Maj. Michael Cohen

"As you know, you go to war with the army you have, not the army you might want or wish to have at a later time."

- Former U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld

The Army They Had

On 28 February 2014, newly-appointed Ukrainian Minister of Defense Ihor Tenyukh briefed the members of Ukraine's National Security Council on the state of the armed forces during Russia's ongoing annexation of Crimea.¹ The picture he painted was bleak by all accounts, and devoid of reassurances, empty or otherwise. Speaking plainly, he informed the assembled members that Ukraine effectively had no military – recently ousted President Yanukovich and his entourage had systematically destroyed it during their tenure. Ukraine could perhaps call upon a total of five thousand capable soldiers from all of the units in Ukraine in a fight against Russia over Crimea. Russia, meanwhile, had at least four times that number just in Crimea at the time. And, the minister correctly pointed out, who would defend the rest of Ukraine if those five thousand—who constituted the sum total of Ukraine's effective army—were sent to engage the Russians in Crimea? Thousands of miles of border with Russia would go unprotected, and the Russians would be in Kyiv by nightfall. Oleksandr Turchynov, chairing the council meeting, asked with an air of disbelief evident even in the written transcript about the supposed 15,000 troops that Ukraine claimed to have in Crimea – were they not capable of action? Tenyukh answered that the figure was only nominal, and proceeded to provide the detailed reasons why that number could not be relied upon. To put this discussion in perspective, Ukraine had been at peace for approximately twenty-three years during this round of independence for their country (there have been other rounds that were less enduring) and had needed no military during that time. In that one critical moment when an unanticipated and existential military threat came to Ukraine, that one moment in twenty-three years of existence, Ukraine had no military with which to defend itself against the cruel humiliations of invasion and annexation of which the civilized world dreamed we had collectively disposed.

The term "nominal figure" about says it all. Ukraine had on paper a military approximately 130,000 strong.² While at first glance the meeting in February of 2014 might seemingly bear little relevance to events that were to take place during the coming summer in East Ukraine, upon closer reflection this meeting is absolutely fundamental to understanding the limitations placed on decision makers and those tasked with executing the orders of the Ukrainian Government. Ukraine's military was hollow – it could not be called upon to perform the core missions assigned to it. Unfortunately for Ukraine and many other nations throughout history faced with unforeseen military threats, effective armies cannot be created overnight.

The dust has not yet settled in the controversy over Ukraine's performance during the Battle of Ilovaisk. Blame continues to be apportioned to the Ministry of Defense for incompetence and self-interest, to lower-ranking officers for allegedly deserting their units, to the volunteer battalions for their alleged indiscipline, to Russia for their treachery, and many others. The wounds are still raw, as many Ukrainian families still await news of loved ones missing, dead, or captured from that battle. The narratives painted by the various allegations are emotionally compelling and tempting to believe, for in them blame is always laid directly at someone's doorstep. In the end, however, we should search for less heat and more light, which leads us directly to the fateful discussions held in Kyiv on the 28th of February: Ukraine effectively had no military. Ukraine had an exceptionally small number of



combat ready soldiers upon which it could actually rely, and the rest was admittedly “nominal.” Any discussion of Ukraine’s reversal of fortune at Ilovaisk should begin here.

“I ask, sir, what is the militia? It is the whole people except for a few public officials.”

– George Mason

Ukraine’s Volunteer Battalions

When Russian-backed separatists began to seize public buildings in East Ukraine, and hoisting Russian and separatist flags over cities and towns, a motley patchwork of hastily-formed pro-Ukrainian irregular forces composed largely (but not exclusively) of local citizens began to take the buildings, towns, and cities back. Most of these units were soon incorporated wholesale into official Ukrainian structures like the Ministry of Defense (MOD) or Interior Ministry (MOI), giving their participation in combat a veneer of legality. Others like the Right Sector and the OUN (Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists) Battalions were not. Some of the battalions were backed by local oligarchs motivated by a rekindled desire to maintain a unified Ukrainian state (for a variety of complicated reasons). In the Eastern Ukrainian City of Dnipropetrovsk, for instance, one of the first to take action was regional governor and billionaire Ihor Kolomoisky. With a nod from from Ukraine’s MOI, he reportedly put over \$10 million of his own fortune³ into the creation of a battalion of volunteer fighters to keep the separatists from taking over the city in April 2014. Many of those who initially signed up were recent participants in the Maidan demonstrations.⁴ By May of 2014 the city was firmly in Ukrainian hands.

Most volunteer battalions were not fortunate enough to have rich sponsors, and relied on volunteer organizations and crowd funding to make ends meet.⁵ The Donbas Battalion, composed mostly of natives of Donetsk and Luhansk, was formed in April of 2014 and later adopted by the Ukrainian National Guard.⁶ Azov, a controversial unit formed by radical far - right figure Andriy Biletskiy⁷ allegedly harboring Neo-Nazis, was adopted by the MOD in May. The creation and official absorption of Aidar and other battalions followed quickly in June 2014. By August 2014, the number of personnel serving in various volunteer battalions reached approximately 4,000 according to estimates from the Ukrainian MOD.⁸

Whatever becomes of Ukraine’s volunteer battalions in the future (and opinions are divided on this), it should never be forgotten that they prevented the occupation of even wider portions of Eastern Ukraine by separatist and Russian forces and filled the wide gap between the army Ukraine had and the army that it intended to field in the future. Together with Ukraine’s few contract soldiers, it is they who largely routed and defeated the separatists in myriad engagements until Russian forces directly intervened in August. Ukraine conducted two mobilizations in June 2014 to fill out the army,⁹ but events demonstrated that many of those called up were neither capable nor willing¹⁰ to fight. While Ukraine may not have had an effective army in the events leading up to Ilovaisk, it did have a core fighting force of professionals bolstered by volunteer units of loyal and determined patriots.

“My center is giving way, my right is retreating, situation excellent, I am attacking.”

– Marshal Ferdinand Foch

Ukraine Seizes the Initiative

Ukraine had been slowly and fitfully implementing reforms of their system for military recruitment and personnel accessions for years before the crisis in 2014, and the fruits of those efforts were roughly 6,000 contract

soldiers¹¹ serving in approximately five brigades throughout Ukraine that were trained and immediately available for duty. This is quite similar to the approximate figure of 5,000 provided by Tenyukh in February 2014. Spread out amongst the 25th Airborne Brigade, 30th Mechanized Brigade, 79th Airmobile Brigade, 80th Airmobile Brigade, the 85th Airmobile Brigade, and the 3rd and 4th Special Forces Regiments, these personnel were immediately assigned to checkpoints in East Ukraine and along the Southeastern coast to prevent the spread of separatist and Russian control.¹² From other incompletely manned units, the Ukrainians formed ‘company tactical groups’ of whatever available personnel were at the unit in question, including officers.¹³ Mobilization would fill out other units once personnel were available, but never to their authorized strength. During this time, a unit’s size typically ranged anywhere from battalion-strength to the size of a single company.

The ATO leadership divided the area of operations into four sectors: A, B, S, and D. From North to South, Sectors A, D, and B were located along the border with Russia from approximately North of Luhansk down to Mariupol on the Azov Sea. Sector S comprised a wide area to the rear of the others, incorporating among others Slavyansk and Kramatorsk. The ATO’s progress towards achieving their goals was steady, even under extremely difficult circumstances including artillery barrages from inside Russia and Russia’s material support to the separatists.¹⁴



Source: Ministry of Defense of Ukraine: Аналіз ведення антитерористичної операції та наслідків вторгнення Російської Федерації в Україну у серпні-вересні 2014 року, August 13, 2015, (Translations by author).



Source: National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine

By the beginning of August, Ukrainian forces were well on their way to achieving their strategic goal of physically separating the separatist strongholds of Donetsk and Luhansk both from the border with Russia, as well as from one another. Ilovaik and Debaltseve were chosen as the Southern and Northern places respectively to begin establishment of this separating corridor.¹⁶ The ATO had extended government control over approximately 60% of the Donetsk and Luhansk Regions, and the separatists were effectively blocked in the North, South, and West.¹⁷ Ukrainian forces had seized key roads linking Donetsk and Luhansk, complicating separatist C2 and movement. Major separatist-controlled population centers were isolated by checkpoints, and numerous cities and towns had been recaptured from separatist control. At the time, one sector continued to trouble Ukrainian planners despite all the other successes achieved: Sector D. A never ending barrage of Russian artillery had made securing the border in that sector nearly impossible. Eight Russian Army Battalion Tactical Groups would soon cross the border in exactly that sector, and decisively change the direction of the conflict.

“Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.”
– Winston Churchill

The End of the Beginning

As previously discussed, capturing and holding Ilovaik in August 2014 became key to achieving the ATO’s strategic goal of cutting the two separatist entities off from one another. The task of isolating and seizing Ilovaik was assigned by the ATO to Sector B. ATO Staff as well as the commander of Sector B Lieutenant General Khomchak estimated that no more than 30-80 lightly armed separatists were in the city.¹⁸ The commander of the MOD-adopted volunteer 40th Territorial Defense Battalion (TDB) “Krivbas” Colonel Motriya, and his intelli-



gence officer Oleksandr Tkachov, instead believed (based on their own information) that separatists in Ilovaik were well armed and prepared for a strong defense. The two felt confident enough to express their misgivings to General Khomchak in person.¹⁹ When Khomchak ordered “Krivbas” to leave their current position and take up positions on all four sides to isolate Ilovaik, Motriya demurred. He argued that not only could he not abandon his current position without relief, he also lacked the forces to accomplish the mission.

Any trust that existed between “Krivbas” and the Commander of Sector B was irrevocably lost as a result of the encounter. Khomchak felt it necessary to call upon elements of other volunteer battalions such as National Guard-adopted “Donbas,” MOI-adopted “Dnipro-1” and “Shakhtarsk,” MOD - adopted “Azov,” and others for the taking of Ilovaik. When counted together, elements of the volunteer “battalions” available had a combined strength of approximately 397 fighters for the first assault attempt. In other words, Ukrainian volunteer forces allocated to attack Ilovaik at that time had roughly a 5:1 ratio against the defending separatists, if Khomchak’s optimistic information proved accurate.

The first attempt to take the city occurred on 10 August, with coordinated assaults by “Azov,” “Donbas,” and “Shakhtarsk” fighters from different directions.²² The volunteer battalions were supposed to be supported by three T-64 tanks and other elements from the Ukrainian Army’s 51st Brigade. Of the three tanks: one broke down, one inexplicably remained at a checkpoint, and another was quickly taken out of action by a separatist / Russian self-propelled artillery system. One BMP from the 51st Brigade also supported the volunteers with fire, but broke down every couple of hundred meters.²³ The attackers managed to break the separatists’ first line of defense in the outskirts of the city itself, with the separatists fleeing ahead of them toward the center. Elements of the Russian Special Forces from the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU in Russian) got in between the disparate elements from “Azov” and “Donbas,” and through engaging and withdrawing almost succeeded in convincing the two pro-Ukrainian battalions that they were exchanging friendly fire.²⁴ The volunteers turned back rather than proceed any further, lacking the necessary forces (and communications between elements)²⁵ to make a proper attempt at the city itself.²⁶

On the 18th of August, Ukrainian forces made a second attempt to take Ilovaik with more forces. Units involved included “Donbas” (220 fighters), “Dnipro-1” (78 fighters), and the MOI - adopted “Myrotvorets” Battalion (74 fighters), “Svityaz” Battalion (30 fighters), “Kherson” Battalion (30 fighters), and “Ivano-Frankivs’k” Battalion (33 fighters). Supporting the volunteers was a company from the 51st Brigade and elements of the 17th Tank Brigade (4 tanks, 4 BMP, and 82 soldiers).²⁷ The plan was for the regular army to isolate Ilovaik, and for the volunteer battalions to then storm the city. First in would be MOD-adopted battalions with heavier weaponry, followed by the MOI battalions.²⁸ If the forces allocated to the first and second attacks seem small number for such a big task, it should be mentioned that “Donbas” had captured both Popasna and Lysichans’k (and had nearly captured Pervomais’k)²⁹ with a similar combination of a couple hundred fighters and a few armored vehicles just before Ilovaik.³⁰ The combined force took half the city in heavy fighting over several days, but could not complete the task before other events intervened to decide their fate. As it happened, “Donbas” was able to confirm Colonel Motriya’s information had been accurate: the city was indeed heavily defended.³¹

“But the leadership of the ATO Staff didn’t expect that the Russian Federation would commit an act of invasion with regular armed forces onto the territory of Ukraine without a declaration of war, in defiance of international humanitarian law (Law of War)”³²

-Ministry of Defense of Ukraine

The Most Dangerous Enemy Course of Action (MDCOA)

On the 24th of August, General Khomchak and Sector B received information about 80-100 Russian



armored vehicles crossing the border into Ukraine.³³ The information might have come from the leadership of Sector D which, along with Ukraine's border service, had tried to inform ATO leadership the day before (23 August) of the same event. The report was met with patent disbelief by the ATO Chief of Staff, Lieutenant General Nazarov, who dismissed it out of hand as false reporting.³⁴ A couple of Ukrainian officers from the 93rd Mechanized Brigade in civilian attire drove past a column of Russian military hardware and soldiers inside Ukraine who, taking the two officers for separatists, greeted them warmly as they passed. The officers duly reported the strange encounter to ATO Leadership. The report was ignored, and the column was explained away by the ATO Staff as a probable Ukrainian element.³⁵ The Chief of Staff for Sector D, Colonel Romihaylo, drove out to Amvrosiivka himself and observed with his own eyes a Russian battalion tactical group driving past him deeper into Ukraine. When he called the Chief of the Ukrainian General Staff General Viktor Muzhenko to report, Muzhenko allegedly told Romihaylo that these were "just demonstrative actions."³⁶ In light of the above, claims by the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense that it only became aware of Russia's 23 August invasion two days later on 25 August³⁷ are very difficult to take seriously.

Facts are stubborn things, and the consequences of the Russian invasion were immediately felt as the MOD - adopted 5th (lightly armed) volunteer Territorial Defense Battalion (TDB) "Prikarpatya," guarding 40 km of border in Sector D, broke and ran in the face of approaching Russian Forces (against orders to stand and fight), opening a gaping hole in the Ukrainian lines.³⁸ Units from the Ukrainian National Guard, protecting the far right flank in Sector D, beat back several attacks of separatist and Russian forces before finally withdrawing. A company tactical group from the 28th Brigade also came under pressure as a result of "Prikarpatya's" exit – most of the mobilized soldiers deserted and went home, leaving a group of seventeen army officers and volunteers behind to fight the Russians (and fight they did on 25 August, eventually breaking out from the Ilovaik pocket on their own).³⁹ By the night of the 23rd, the flank protecting Ukraine's forces in Ilovaik ceased to exist.⁴⁰

The fighting continued within Ilovaik as supplies and ammunition ran low amongst the Ukrainian forces. Faced with the dramatic change in circumstances occasioned by Russia's invasion, they were now in an extremely precarious position. First, their original purpose in capturing Ilovaik (to cut off Donetsk and Luhansk from one another) now no longer bore any connection to strategic reality,⁴¹ as Russian forces were very clearly on the offensive. Second, getting out was only going to get tougher by the day, as Russian forces would move to quickly encircle the city and trap the forces inside. What to do? Should they press on and capture the rest of the city, for whatever reason? Should they try and break out from the rapidly tightening noose? General Khomchak contacted ATO leadership several times over the next couple of days seeking a decision – he didn't have the authority to order anything like this on his own. The only answer he received was to "hold tight and wait for reinforcements."⁴² What these promised reinforcements were intended to be used for one can only guess. In the end, no new orders or reinforcements came.

The fighting continued outside Ilovaik, where Ukrainian units on the ground fought the Russian forces that the ATO Staff claims not to have yet known about. A Russian column without markings approached a checkpoint of the 51st Mechanized Brigade, where artillery officer Captain Koval requested permission from his higher headquarters to open fire.⁴³ Permission was denied, as the column could not be identified. The column promptly, as if on cue, identified itself by firing on the Ukrainian positions. Captain Koval's battery returned fire, destroying the lead BMP-2 in the Russian column. The battery and elements of "Krivbas" located with it withdrew after dark. Koval's unit again the next day, on August 25, engaged Russian airborne forces South of Mnohopillya. His battery destroyed 3 Russian MT-LB armored vehicles before sustaining heavy return fire.

Another volunteer unit, the MOD--adopted TDB "Horyn,"--had also run from the fight on 24 August. This departure left the city of Ilovaik wide open to attack from the direction of Donetsk.⁴⁴ On the 25th, the 2nd Battalion Tactical Group of the 51st Mechanized Brigade fought back a Russian attack out of Donetsk near the village of Styla. The 3rd Battalion Tactical Group of the 51st fought off another Russian assault near the village of



Dzerkalnoye.⁴⁵ From 25-27 August, more engagements took place. In one such, staff officers from Sector B Headquarters and elements of the 17th Tank Brigade took on Russian forces near the village of Novodvirs'ke. In that engagement, Ukrainian forces captured a T-72B3 Tank, destroyed another, and destroyed a BMD-2 along with its infantry complement.⁴⁶ These engagements did little to change the ominous direction of strategic events. By 25 August, Ilovaik was cut off from the South and by the 27th, from the West. The ring around Ilovaik had closed, and the Ukrainians still fighting for control over the city were now trapped inside.

The rest of the story regarding the Ilovaik Tragedy has been intensively reported on and scrutinized. General Khomchak later reached what he believed was an agreement with Russian Forces to withdraw Ukrainian forces from the city under a guarantee of safety. He reached this decision for Ukrainian Forces to leave Ilovaik on his own, and took responsibility upon himself for the outcome.⁴⁷ Khomchak refused to order his units to lay down arms as the Russians initially demanded, however, and did what he felt he could to ready his units for a breakout if necessary. The promise of safety either never existed, or was immediately broken by Russian forces which ambushed the Ukrainian columns from prepared positions and nearly annihilated them in a completely cynical and one-sided affair. The remains of those killed in that engagement are still being collected and identified to this day. Many will likely never be found and identified, causing unbelievable suffering to their friends and loved ones. While the Ukrainian Parliamentary Report goes into detail as to how the negotiations for the safe corridor should have been conducted, and with whom, when, and at what level,⁴⁸ an alternative conclusion could be not to ever count on Russia or its representatives adhering to an agreement when it ceases to be in their immediate interest to comply.

"To them I say: believe those who are seeking the truth; doubt those who find it.."

-André Gide

The Search for Truth

After any tragedy comes the inevitable search for blame. It is illustrative to look at whom various Ukrainian stakeholders hold responsible for the tactical and strategic errors leading up to Ilovaik. For the Rada (Parliament), the blame lies squarely with the General Staff and Minister of Defense.⁴⁹ The Rada report blames them for not pushing for the imposition of martial law, of placing career interests before national welfare, for micromanaging operations, delaying critical decisions, lying to the public, and for using ill-trained volunteers to fight a war in lieu of regular forces. The report clears the Sector Commanders of responsibility (on perhaps an unrelated note, the commander of Sector D, General Lytvyn, had a brother in Parliament at the time) and clears the volunteer battalions of culpability. We will come back to some of these allegations later.

The report provided by the Ministry of Defense lays a heavy helping of blame on the performance of the volunteer battalions⁵⁰ for their indiscipline and insubordination. Missing from the report, however, is any account of the seizure of Ilovaik and the military's decision to hold portions of it for so long. The report essentially argues that the true cause of all the problems at Ilovaik was Russia's direct participation in the fighting, and that everything had been going rather well on balance prior to that. Ukraine had simply not expected the moves Russia subsequently had made. It was as if Ukraine had expected a game of chess, and suddenly found itself playing dodgeball mid-way through.

First, the claim that introducing martial law would have made fighting the war easier has some merit. In spite of all the other political and economic effects such a declaration would have had (such as a possible open war with Russia),⁵¹ fighting the war would indeed have been simplified. As it was, the ATO functioned simply as a coordinating center between the various ministries and agencies supplying forces to the effort.⁵² In some cases, coordination issues led to lost time and questionable decisions on the ground at the tactical level.⁵³ In a state of war,



the Ukrainian General Staff would have had overall command and control, and could have ordered rather than coordinated.

The question, asked by both commanders of volunteer battalions and by the Rada, of why volunteers were used in combat rather than regular forces has what seems to be a simple answer: Ukraine simply did not have a sufficient quantity of adequately prepared and equipped soldiers to fight the war using those means alone. ATO Chief of Staff General Viktor Nazarov acknowledged as much during a press interview in December 2014, comparing the immense territory of the Area of Operations from the very beginning of the operation and the limited resources assigned to operate within it. Commanders of various volunteer battalions however, continue to harbor a deep disdain for Ukraine's senior military leadership. They have voiced suspicions that they were deliberately used as cannon fodder due to their genuine desire to root out corruption and reform the governance of the state. In their view, the senior echelons of the military are militarily incompetent, corrupt, and demonstrate questionable loyalty to the state as a group. The reluctance of the Ministry of Defense to arm the volunteers in the beginning also contributed to the suspicions of the commanders. Curiously enough, Ukraine's MOD specifically excludes the volunteer battalions from their accounting of resources allocated to the ATO (or Anti-Terrorist Operation, as the Ukrainians referred to it) from February 2014 up to the Ilovaisk

If the volunteers were so unreliable and ineffective, why had the MOD then relied on them so heavily? The answer leads us right back to the resource issues Ukraine found itself confronted with from the very beginning. Reliable or not, the forces Ukraine had at the time (regular and volunteer) were the forces available at the time. Reliance on mobilized soldiers led to some key disasters arguably as big as those caused later by the dereliction of certain volunteer battalions. For every example provided of volunteer units breaking down, corresponding examples involving regular units can be found. In the aftermath of Ilovaisk, for example, President Poroshenko announced the dissolution of the 51st Mechanized Brigade for having allegedly disobeyed orders.⁶⁰ Another regular army brigade reportedly had 300 flee during the fighting, but was not disbanded as a result.⁶¹

Next, let us examine the issue of direct Russian participation on the ground in East Ukraine. Could this really have been all that unimaginable to senior commanders after what had happened in Crimea? One phrase from the Rada's report fuels much speculation as to possible reasons why the answer could be yes. In the response to General Khomchak's report of a Russian invasion, ATO leadership stated "We have been through this."⁶² No explanation is given in the report, and we are left to draw our own conclusions as to what is meant. Had false reports been received before, and given credence? Did Russian forces perhaps seed false reports in an act of operational deception? Russia's ongoing military exercises near the Ukrainian border could also have provoked some false reporting. For whatever reason, reports of Russia's invasion on 23 August not only came as a surprise to the Ukrainians, but also as a shock. This is in spite of General Nazarov's contention that he fully considered it as a possibility during planning for the ATO.⁶³

In the end, casting all of the allegations aside, we find ourselves back at the beginning: Ukraine had no effective army precisely when it needed one. If the army it had on paper had existed in reality in May of 2014, the separatists would have been routed quickly in spite of any setbacks along the way. Consistently, the "separatists" could call on more fighters in East Ukraine to do their bidding than could the Government of Ukraine.⁶⁴ Limited resources made it difficult for the ATO Staff to recover from what might have otherwise been minor setbacks, mistakes or defeats. Troops and equipment losses could not be addressed quickly. The use of volunteer battalions to fill manpower gaps was almost inevitable considering shortages of professional soldiers, and their use in combat would also therefore be necessary using the same logic. Ukraine's chronic shortages turned what could have been a battlefield defeat at Ilovaisk into a national disaster, and then into a tragedy. What is truly remarkable is not the eventual outcome of the battle of Ilovaisk, but rather how far Ukraine had come in the months preceding the battle, and with how few resources it had managed to accomplish so much. Ukraine went to war with the army it had, and not with the one it wished it had at the time, nor with the one it has today. It is by that standard that we should objectively measure their victories and defeats.



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