

Two Armies in One

James Meek on the Russians in Ukraine

WHEN General Valery Zaluzhny, then Ukraine's senior military commander, spoke in November of a stalemate, it was widely taken in the West as a signal that the war was frozen in all but name: that Ukraine and Russia had reached their fighting limits, that Russia could invade no further and Ukraine could liberate no more. Ukraine's southern summer counteroffensive had fallen far short of its objective, the city of Melitopol, which would have cut off Russia's land route to Crimea; it didn't get even halfway to the consolation goal, the key junction town of Tokmak. Russia's own offensive efforts in the east of the country this winter have left acres of snowfields strewn with burning vehicles and dead soldiers, with little to show in terms of ground gained. Surely, if the two sides' war machines are jammed solid, like a pair of buzz-saw blades stuck against each other, it would be easier to switch them off than pry them apart – to declare a truce, let the battle lines become an armistice line à la Korea or Cyprus, and spend the next fifty years talking it out?

Such thoughts are strengthened by the seductive notion that if the fighting were to stop now, both Ukraine and Russia could, while mourning their dead, pick through the same selection of facts and claim to have 'won'. Russia would have conquered tens of thousands of square miles of rich land full of farms, mines and factories, together with millions of people it could force to become Russian whether they liked it or not. It would possess the Azov Sea and a land route to Crimea. It would have affirmed alliances with China, Iran, North Korea and dozens of Middle Eastern and African countries. It would have defied sanctions and built a defence industry stronger, in some respects, than when the war began. It would have punished Ukraine for its rejection of Russian suzerainty, not just killing tens of thousands of its people but ruining thousands of homes, schools and hospitals, razing entire towns, taking its largest nuclear power station and crippling its economy. It would have frightened Europe and the US, showing it won't shirk from a staggering level of violence and grievous self-inflicted wounds to further its leaders' aims. It would have shrugged off the emigration of a few hundred thousand disaffected young people, and the deaths and maiming of tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands of Russians, as the necessary price of success. It would have brutally and successfully shown its power to crush what little internal opposition remains. It would have exposed the limits of Nato and the EU – Ukraine gets talks about membership, not membership – and of US politics, demonstrating that there's no US foreign policy, only Republican or Democratic policy. Russia would have done all this without having to resort to full mobilisation; without doing much damage, at least on the surface, to the shopping and leisure habits of the middle classes of Moscow and St Petersburg.

True as all this is, couldn't it be said with equal truth that Ukraine has 'won'? If the war stopped now, Ukraine would have beaten and humiliated an invader many times its size and strength, successfully keeping most of the country free, holding nearly all the major cities it

controlled when the full-scale invasion began, including the ones Russia wanted most dearly, Kyiv and Odesa. It would have crippled the army of the aggressor, forcing Russia to pull ancient tanks out of storage, scour the world and its prisons for fighters, and go cap in hand to North Korea for ammunition. It would have strengthened its statehood and united the country as never before. Free Ukraine would not have frozen, starved, gone dark, or lapsed into authoritarianism. It would have compensated for its lack of a navy and a strategic air force, improvising drones to strike land targets deep inside Russia and, at sea, forcing the Russian Black Sea Fleet to retreat, lifting its blockade of Ukrainian ports, which are now exporting grain again. It would have found a previously unimaginable degree of solidarity with Western countries, acquiring billions of dollars' worth of weaponry, to the point where it doesn't seem extraordinary that a Ukrainian aircraft can fire a Franco-British cruise missile to disable a Russian submarine, or that Ukrainian troops can use American missiles to shoot down Russian rockets. It would have seen Germany go cold turkey on Russian gas and learn to get by without it. Far from Putin stopping the expansion of Nato, he sped it up: Finland and Sweden rushed to sign on.

Again – true. But Zaluzhny, who was sacked in early February, perhaps for going public with too bleak a view of Ukraine's situation, didn't mean this when he talked of 'stalemate'. He didn't mean a war in which two armies had fought themselves to a final standstill. He meant that for a certain time – perhaps a year or two, perhaps months – neither side would be able to liberate or conquer significant territory. He writes of the advent of 'positional warfare', where front lines are relatively fixed and fortified, where the two sides bombard each other with artillery and drones and use long-range air attacks to attack each other's infrastructure. In this period the battlefield becomes static, but the war doesn't. Dynamism and manoeuvre simply move to different realms: the factory, the CAD workstation, the recruiting office, the training ground and, in the case of Ukraine and its allies, the legislature. Neither side can be said to have won at the front, but there's no doubt what's happening in terms of shells and soldiers: Russia is pulling ahead. Ukraine's allies in Europe and North America are dawdling, bickering among themselves, or, in some cases, like Slovakia, actively turning against it. As things stand, the advantage in men and materiel that Russia is accruing will eventually give Putin an advantage, allowing him to dismember, punish or perhaps even swallow Ukraine whole, as he chooses.

There's a self-comforting argument made by some in the West which holds that Putin would be glad to stop fighting tomorrow if he could be sure Russia would get to keep what it had already seized, while the Ukrainians would have to stop tomorrow if the West stopped arming them. Ergo, Western support is all that sustains the war. According to this line of reasoning – proclaimed in Hungary by Viktor Orbán, in Slovakia by Robert Fico, in Germany by the nationalist leftist Sahra Wagenknecht and the pro-Russian AfD, and in the US by sub-Trumps like Vivek Ramaswamy – Putin's invasion was merely regrettable (though Trump himself called the first stage of the attack 'genius'). In this view, the real enemies of peace, the true villains, are Joe Biden, Emmanuel Macron, Olaf Scholz, Rishi Sunak, Volodymyr Zelensky and the liberal/trad-right media, who perpetuate the war in the vain hope of weakening Russia by throwing weapons at the poor, simple Ukrainians, forcing them to go on dying. Ukraine has nothing to gain from futile attempts to push the Russians further back, the argument goes, and no risk of losing more by letting Putin keep what he already has.

There are a number of flaws in this way of thinking. It implies, echoing Kremlin spin, that Ukrainians only continue to resist because Zelensky and the West force them to, rather than because they don't want to have their compatriots in the conquered regions killed, abused, deported to Russia or simply obliged to submit silently. It denies agency to Ukrainians in the

free republic, who are not subject, as Russians in Russia are, to an extensive apparatus of state repression. It also denies agency to the Russians themselves, treating them, helpfully from Putin's point of view, as a force of nature, wild predators who can't be expected to change their ways. Genuine pacifists, while decrying Western arms supplies, continue to demand that Putin end the war, as he could in 48 hours, by pulling his troops back to their start lines. Those making the permanent stalemate argument aren't pacifists; they are self-declared 'realists', but realists who want to be thought well of. Their argument, often expressed in terms of sympathy with 'ordinary Ukrainians', implies an ethical superiority over those who want to see the continued arming of Ukraine. The 'realistic' logic that it is better to accept things as they are than risk harm by continuing to resist makes a certain utilitarian sense, especially if you're not the one being attacked, but the coldness of the reasoning is problematic for those who voice it: they insist that those who have the greatest care for Putin's victims are those who would let Putin have at them with the least inconvenience.

The greatest weakness in the permanent stalemate argument is the unproven assumption it relies on. If Ukraine with a steady supply of Western weaponry is too weak to dent Russian lines, Ukraine minus Western arms would no longer be able to hold a rearming Russia back. The only thing stopping Russia from biting off more of Ukraine would be if Putin were satisfied with the lands he has already conquered. There's nothing to suggest he is satisfied, and much to indicate that he wants more, and believes he can get it. 'Not only has their counteroffensive failed, but the initiative is completely in the hands of the Russian armed forces,' he said in mid-January. 'If things go on as they are, Ukrainian statehood may be dealt an unendurable, very serious blow.' In his recent interview with the Trumpist American journalist and conspiracist Tucker Carlson, Putin conspicuously failed to answer when asked several times if he was satisfied with the Ukrainian territory Russia now holds.

Publicly, Zelensky refuses to compromise on Ukraine's war aims. His views have hardened since the early months of the war, and remain, officially at least, where they were in early 2023, when the extent of Russian atrocities against Ukrainian civilians in captured areas had become plain and when belief in the Ukrainian armed forces was at its strongest. The stated goal of absolute victory, of Ukraine restoring its borders to those of 1991 (borders that Putin formally accepted in 2003) may be unattainable – even unwise, in respect of Crimea and eastern Donbas. But it has the virtue of clarity, which is more than can be said for the goals of Russia or the Western powers.

Putin has been using armed force to try to change Ukraine's borders since 2014, without ever saying exactly what he wants: he has never put terms to Ukraine that it could satisfy without falling into subservience, and that includes the unworkable Minsk Accords. While complaining that Ukraine refuses to negotiate, he effectively derecognises his presumptive negotiating partners by denying the legitimacy of the Zelensky government and of Ukraine as a country; insists on a vague, sweeping aim of 'denazification' that appears no more sophisticated than dehumanising Ukrainians who disagree with him; and sabotages talks in advance by changing his country's constitution to declare territory he doesn't yet hold as part of Russia.

These and other obstacles to a truce could be swept away. Putin could recognise Zelensky and the rump Ukraine, merely by denying that he hadn't; he could limit 'denazification' to a demand that Ukraine reassess its official tolerance of the minority cult of actual-Nazi-tainted historical figures like Stepan Bandera; and get his tame parliament to re-tweak the constitution using different boundaries. But a settlement would mean drawing a line between his conquests so far and his hopes to dominate the whole of Ukraine by some mixture of

subjugation and international consent. There is no hint that he's ready to do this. Hard as he is to read through his skilful bluff and bluster, he seems optimistic that he can keep what he has and gain more against a divided, distracted, fed-up Euro-American world. In these circumstances, the Ukrainians could be forgiven for believing the only borders they can rely on are those their soldiers draw in combat.

Drawing a line is critical, too, for the West. The EU's recent agreement to offer Ukraine €50 billion for its civilian needs over the next four years, together with tough talk from Scholz and Macron, signal that the rest of Europe would rather not abandon the country, even if Trump does win this year's US presidential election. But the EU's contingent strategic goal – enabling Ukraine to hold the current front line, giving it what it needs to take back the entire country, or, most likely, helping it make limited gains while persuading Kyiv to settle for a less than perfect victory – demands a degree of military support more co-ordinated, more expensive, more long-lasting and ultimately more risky than what is being provided now. With American decision-making in the grip of Trump First policies, Europe, including Britain, risks losing Ukraine in a fog of hesitation and indecisiveness.

Quite apart from compelling Putin to accept less than he still expects to win, Ukraine and the West are bound eventually to take up the bitter duty of agreeing between themselves a line on the map that they can and will hold indefinitely. The difficulty is profound for Ukraine. If the line the West undertakes to support falls short of the 1991 border – if, for example, it were to exclude Crimea – Ukraine would keep a claim to the peninsula only in theory; in practice, it would accept Crimea's loss in exchange for the security of the remainder, as most Ukrainians were probably ready to do in 2014, when Putin originally seized the territory. Ukrainians are less forgiving now, and if Crimea is a divisive issue for Ukrainians, the future of the Azov port of Mariupol, seized by Russia in 2022 after a hideous battle, is even more so. But Ukraine's Western sponsors are inclined to distinguish between 'peace' and 'victory'. A year ago, when hopes were still high for the counteroffensive, Zelensky told Biden, who was visiting Kyiv, that their talks 'bring us closer to victory'. Last December, when Zelensky saw Biden in Washington, Biden's message was different: he has always taken care to emphasise the importance of denying Putin victory, rather than of enabling an immaculate victory for Ukraine. 'For Ukraine to be standing strong and free,' he said, 'is an enormous victory already.'

Before Ukrainians can get their heads around future armistice lines, the country has to hold what it has – and, starved of munitions while Russia's defence industry goes into high gear, it is finding that more difficult. Western money for the war effort is stuttering. The EU's €50 billion is explicitly not for Ukraine's military needs. When the EU decided after the invasion to help Ukraine with weapons, it created what may be the world's most expensive euphemism: it turned to a pre-existing pot of billions called the European Peace Facility. The use of this money, which has increased significantly since the start of the war, has been mired in discord, with France trying to restrict its use to buying EU weapons, and Germany, Ukraine's biggest direct donor of arms after the US, baulking at paying double to be Kyiv's benefactor, once by giving weapons directly, and again by paying into the common fund. Across the Atlantic, a significant fraction of congressional Republicans, taking their cue from Trump, seek to block aid to Ukraine not so much because they despise or disregard it – though some of them do – as because they seek to deny Biden a win of any kind. It was one of the crazier moments in the decline of America as a coherent actor on the world stage when Republicans, who had insisted they wouldn't agree to more aid for Ukraine unless Biden yielded to them on immigration, went back on their word as soon as Biden did yield, simply because Trump wanted to build his presidential campaign on the premise that Biden

wouldn't act on immigration. Republican representatives fled from Biden giving them what they wanted on the Mexican border as if it were poison – and seven time zones away, the Ukrainians started to run out of ammunition.

The intermittence of Western arms money is not the Ukrainian military's only problem as it organises to do three things: hold Russia at bay this year, push it back in the medium term, and create an impregnable defence for an indefinite future truce. Alongside the lack of money to fund weapons is the lack of weapons to buy. Ukraine itself has a large defence industry, but before the invasion it was deeply corrupt, badly run, ravaged by careless privatisation and riddled with 'waiters', as the Ukrainians call those who were waiting for the Russians to come. Its scale, too, was misleading: it had never shaken off its role as an adjunct to a Soviet defence industry that concentrated most of the top-level design and assembly work in Russia itself. The waiters weren't just Soviet nostalgists; when the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia was still their best customer. Vyacheslav Boguslayev was the head of Motor Sich, an enterprise in the Ukrainian city of Zaporizhzhya that makes aircraft and helicopter engines, including those used in Russia's most modern helicopter gunships. He was arrested after the invasion for enthusiastically selling essential parts to Ukraine's enemy. The Ukrainian security service, the SBU, released a recording of him talking on the phone to one of his Russian contacts after a Russian rocket attack on his factory. For Boguslayev, the customer is always right, even when the customer has just dropped warheads on his workplace. 'We're absolutely not angry about it in the least,' he told his interlocutor. 'We understand.'

With its defence industry reorganised and somewhat purged, Ukraine has begun making its own shells and heavy artillery and stepped up production of armoured vehicles and missiles. It was a Ukrainian-designed missile that sank the Russian Black Sea Fleet flagship, the *Moskva*, in 2022. But it has struggled to turn the ingenuity of its engineers and designers – Ukraine was a centre of drone innovation even before the invasion – into mass production, not least because nowhere in Ukraine is out of Russian missile range, and any developing arms factory becomes a target for attack. Recently Mykhailo Fedorov, Ukraine's young 'digital transformation' minister, has promoted a project by a non-profit foundation that aims to teach Ukrainians to assemble small kamikaze 'FPV' drones – modified hobbyist quadcopters carrying makeshift explosive payloads – at home. 'Do you want to build an FPV drone with your own hands that will burn a Russian tank?' the project website asks. 'Then this opportunity is for you!'

Government enthusiasm for a cottage kamikaze drone industry (the foundation, it should be noted, doesn't ask amateur constructors to add the explosives themselves in their kitchens) is a sign of how dependent the Ukrainian army has become on using FPV drones to fight off Russian armoured attacks in the absence of a regular supply of shells for its big guns. Between the ex-Soviet equipment it already had, the gear it has captured from Russia, and donations from allies – some new, some used, some renovated – the Ukrainians have built up a formidable, if chaotically mismatched, arsenal of artillery, tanks and anti-aircraft systems. But they rely on Europe and the US to keep up the flow of material that this array of weapons greedily consumes. Each missile fired at an incoming Russian rocket has to be replaced, or the next rocket might get through. Gun barrels wear out after firing a certain number of rounds. And the Ukrainians fire a lot of rounds, if they have them: increasingly they don't, while the Russians do.

AT the centre of Ukraine's ammunition shortage is a particular heavy artillery shell, more or less standard in Nato and East Asian armies, the 155 mm. Russia uses a similar, slightly slimmer shell, the 152 mm. Although it can come with expensive add-ons, it's basically a more precisely engineered, streamlined version of a contrivance first used by the army of the Jin dynasty in the siege of Qizhou eight hundred years ago: a metal enclosure for explosives, shot out of a cannon. The modern 155 mm shell weighs about 45 kg and has a range of fourteen miles or more, forcing opposing troops to dig and hide in deep trenches. If you've seen footage of Ukrainian towns and villages crushed flat in the fighting, the destroyed blocks of Mariupol or indeed the ruins of Grozny after Putin finished his work there in the 2000s, it was shells like these that did most of the damage. But in the terrifying panopticon of the new battlefield, where drone vision is ubiquitous, it is also a defensive weapon: a large enough battery of 155 mm guns, or their Russian equivalents, can saturate a field with fire and break down an opponent's attack, or target the enemy's build-up of artillery – if it has the ammunition.

Most of Ukraine's Western allies, including the US, Germany, France and Britain, are trying to produce more shells, but they can't make them fast enough, and increasing capacity is difficult. The dynamics of the Cold War, and the shaming calamities of asymmetric warfare in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan, led Euro-Atlantic general staffs to doubt they would ever again need Second World War-style production lines to churn out shells and rocket motors in quantity. Arms manufacturers promoted the idea of small numbers of expensive, high-tech, precision weapons that took decades to design and produce: a handful of stealth aircraft, a few super-fancy tanks, a clutch of missiles that would take years to replace in the unlikely event they were ever used. Complex weapons, as a result, came to be put together like hand-built luxury cars, while basics like artillery shells have been made on a small-batch, artisanal basis.

Ukraine's early successes were widely seen through the prism of these assumptions: if the country was beating back the Russian behemoth, it must be because of the small number of sophisticated Western anti-tank missiles the US and Britain had supplied. But the main high-tech innovation that enabled the Ukrainians to fight back was Elon Musk's Starlink satellite network, which wasn't developed with military requirements in mind. And the main weapon Starlink was used to co-ordinate was old-fashioned artillery. There's a video on the internet of a column of elderly Soviet-era Ukrainian cannon grinding over a flyover in central Kyiv, just before the invasion: these were the big guns that saved Ukraine's capital from being overrun.

The appetite for shells to feed these guns is huge. Immediately after the invasion, France was able to send Ukraine a thousand 155 mm shells a month. By the beginning of 2024, this figure had increased to three thousand a month – which sounds impressive, except that Ukraine says it needs seven thousand a day, or two and a half million a year. In a recent paper with the ominous title 'Making Attrition Work', two of the most knowledgeable observers of the way the war is being fought, Franz-Stefan Gady and Michael Kofman, point out that the amount of ammunition Ukraine needs varies radically according to whether its army is defending or attacking. They estimate that it requires as many as a quarter of a million shells a month for an offensive, and at least 75,000 a month just to hold its ground. Assuming eight months of defence and a four-month summer offensive, Ukraine's requirements would be about one and a half million shells for a year of war. Last year Europe pledged to deliver a million shells to Ukraine by March; it will be lucky to manage half that number. The EU is unlikely to be able to make up for the Trump First blockage of US supplies until 2025 at the earliest, by which time it may be too late.

European governments demand that their commercial ammunition producers come up with the goods, but companies are reluctant to invest in production facilities without better government guarantees, for fear that a sudden outbreak of peace will leave them with mountains of unsold shells. In Norway Nammo was prevented from expanding production because a new TikTok data centre bagged the electricity supplies. America's government-controlled shell factories are ramping up faster, but the Republicans won't let Biden send shells to Ukraine. The very countries that are, according to their governments, most eager to help Ukraine are competing with it for the same shells; having run down their arsenals to send ammunition to Kyiv at the beginning of the war, they now want to refill them, with an eye to their own security. It's hard to imagine the small part of Europe's population ready to go out on the streets to protest rallying in support of ammunition production for Ukraine; on the contrary, two of the most salient European protest strands today are demos outside those arms factories, whose products may also be going to Israel, and protests by Eastern European farmers against the EU's relaxation of tariff barriers against Ukrainian agricultural products.

The result is that Ukraine's power to hold the line it has looks shaky. Instead of seven thousand shells a day, its guns are rationed to two thousand or fewer, which means that Russia is able to mass artillery and troops for offensives more safely. No matter how many FPV drones Ukraine has – and each one requires its own human controller – they have a range of only a few miles, which makes them a last-ditch weapon.

Russia has prosecuted its invasion of Ukraine with two armies in one: an old-style Soviet wartime army of minimally trained soldiers, massed artillery and mechanised divisions, backed up by production lines in the hinterland able to churn out shells by the hundreds of thousands; and a new, emergent Russian army of professional soldiers and relatively small numbers of high-tech weapons which aim to achieve their effect, à la Nato, through precision rather than volume. By cleverly dodging sanctions on imported electronics and machine tools through networks of intermediaries in friendly third countries like China and neutral countries like those in Central Asia; with access to vast reserves of raw materials, which it can use to feed its defence industry and export to fund spending; and by risking the long-term health of its economy by staking everything on a short-term dash for arms output, Russia has been able to keep both armies going.

It's true that the professional army is operating in a more constrained way: many of its soldiers are dead or disabled, and Russia doesn't have the time to train new ones. While the country is producing and even improving advanced weapons like cruise missiles and modern tanks to a degree the West hadn't thought possible under sanctions, it can't keep up with losses. But the Soviet-army-within-the-Russian-army is expanding. Eventually, if losses continue at current rates, it will run out of the old tanks and armoured infantry carriers it is pulling out of storage and refurbishing – but this will take a while. The shell famine Russia experienced in 2023 has been alleviated, partly through the efforts of its own factories and partly with the help of North Korea, which has opened up its arsenals (its guns are the same calibre as Russia's) and dispatched wagon after wagon of munitions to European Russia on the Trans-Siberian Railway.

Where Russia has won territory over the last year, it's been with the old-style army, and at enormous cost. Last year there were the infamous 'meat assaults' of the late and intemperate mercenary leader Yevgeny Prigozhin, spearheaded by recruits from Russian prisons, who were offered the chance to have their convictions overturned if they fought for the motherland. They took the city of Bakhmut, with appalling losses. This winter regular Russian mechanised units have been launching attacks on Avdiivka, near Donetsk, and in the

north of Ukraine, east of Kharkiv. As tough as the Ukrainians found things in their failed summer offensive, the Russians seem to be faring worse. Drone video after drone video shows long columns of Russian armoured vehicles following a path through minefields cleared by specialist engineering vehicles, a narrow strip of black soil drawn across the snow. They crawl in single file. One of them hits a mine. Shells rain down. Anti-tank missiles fly into them. Drones crash into them and explode. The black-on-white strip pointing towards the enemy loops back on itself as the vehicles try to retreat. Diagonals of filthy smoke boil up into the sky. Immobilised tanks are on fire. Infantry abandon their vehicles and run for cover, but the only cover on the frozen fields is shell-holes.

AND YET the Russians keep coming. Their gains are incremental, but actual. Failed Russian attacks shown on Ukrainian channels are not incompatible with success in other places and at other times. Another Donbas town, Marinka, fell to Russia, and was destroyed in the process. And although the Russians take terrible losses, each attack also brings its share of Ukrainian dead and wounded, which the country cannot spare. As well as its advantage in ammunition, Russia has a far bigger population than unoccupied Ukraine's – more than 140 million against an estimated 30 million or fewer Ukrainians, not counting the refugees who have moved abroad – and is spending its young men's lives with ruthless abandon. It's not that there is anything less profound in a Russian mother's grief for her dead son than a Ukrainian or British mother's, but their grief takes place in the isolation of a society which, taking its cue from the top, limits national consciousness of the scale of the deaths it has inflicted on itself to a stiff evocation of general sacrifice. Russians who take the trouble can find out what is actually going on in the war pretty easily, through Telegram; even the gung-ho Russian pro-war channels will mention Ukrainian reports. But it can't be easy for the families of the dead and maimed that the official Russian media gives so relentlessly one-sided a version of events: where Ukrainians only ever kill civilians, or their own men; where Russian troops don't die. At the end of January a pack of Ukrainian naval drones hunted down and sank a Russian warship with a fifty-strong crew, filming it blowing up and sinking. The loss was confirmed on pro-war Russian Telegram channels. Neither of the two main Russian news channels has mentioned it.

Putin himself has been tested too many times for there to be any doubt that he doesn't do remorse: he gives the impression of a man who feels that admitting the slightest personal concern for the deaths he is responsible for would be a dangerous act of weakness, a kind of treachery. Or perhaps he really feels nothing. He travels around the country constantly, holding forth in panels and seminars, meetings with officials and painstakingly staged encounters with regular Russians. He's always confident, always chipper. Sometimes his demeanour is that of the friendly boss with a remarkable grasp of detail, promising to right a bureaucratic wrong. Sometimes a different mood takes him; a strange smile and a distant look will appear on his face, and he'll tell an unlikely story about something idiotic the Ukrainians or the West are doing, punctuating the telling with wheezy little laughs, not like the president of Russia, but like a man in a bar telling a stranger about something he heard from his cousin who works in the president's office. When, as he often does, he offers up some astounding fiction about the war – such as the assertion that the gruelling slog for control of Krynyky, a village on the marshy eastern bank of the Dnieper, only involved a handful of light injuries on the Russian side – he speaks with such sincerity and conviction that the listener doesn't know whether to marvel at his talent for lying or wonder at how much he's being lied to. He looks as if he's enjoying himself. He seems happiest misinterpreting obscure episodes of Russian and Ukrainian history. He's free to go on about it; nobody is going to interrupt him. He prefaced his Carlson interview by asking for a minute to put the invasion in historical context, then spoke for a quarter of an hour, much of it about

the eighth and ninth centuries. Whatever stops the war, it won't be Putin's conscience, and the vast, apparently fatalistic pool of manpower in the Russian hinterland allows him to keep topping up his army from flyover country, without trespassing on the hipster reservations of the country's smarter, richer cities.

There is of course a theoretical chance that Europe and the US will get round to sending Ukraine the ammunition it needs before it's too late. But they aren't going to send soldiers. To carry on fighting, to replace its losses, to expand its army and to give those who have been fighting non-stop for two years a break, Ukraine needs to call up more young men – men who aren't volunteers, who aren't trained. For months, president, parliament and government have been trying to come up with a new mobilisation law that is both strict and fair. But no matter how many new soldiers Ukraine manages to call up, it can't compete with Russia, body for body. It can't beat an increasingly old-school Soviet army of massed tanks, artillery and human waves with a numerically inferior Soviet-style force of its own.

Just as the West has failed to match its stirring rhetoric on Ukraine with a plan for arming the country's present and future defence, it has failed to come up with a plan to help Ukraine train the specialists and senior commanders who could give the country an edge over the more numerous invader. Jack Watling, a military analyst at the Royal United Services Institute who has made many visits to the front lines in Ukraine, argues that the main reason the country's effort to break through Russian defences failed last summer was lack of training, not just for ordinary soldiers but for the commanders who are supposed to co-ordinate tens of thousands of troops over a huge battlefield. 'Over the course of the war,' Watling wrote in *Foreign Affairs*, 'the number of active Ukrainian troops has quintupled with no significant rise in the number of trained staff officers.'

Modern armies are organised in a pyramid of units: several soldiers make a fireteam, several fireteams make a section, several sections make a platoon, several platoons make a company, several companies make a battalion, several battalions make a brigade, several brigades make a division, several divisions make a corps. But at every level, specialists and managers should swell the numbers: planners, administrators, gunners, missile and drone operators, medics. It's here that a potentially fatal gap has opened up. To use a civilian analogy, the Ukrainian army is like a mid-sized construction company that has spent ten years building rural housing estates, then expands overnight into building cities, massively increasing the number of labourers, but without adding town planners, architects or engineers.

It's risky for Ukrainians to hold division-sized exercises in western Ukraine, because it would expose themselves to Russian air attack. But the only training the West offers, apart from teaching selected groups how to use this or that piece of donated equipment, is to take small groups of infantry on five-week basic skills courses, much less than the time a Nato soldier would spend. Europe might in theory offer one of its big training grounds for large-scale Ukrainian exercises, but they would have to tackle the problem that the war the Ukrainians and Russians are fighting is not the war Nato is used to training for; the sheer density of drones over the battlefield is new for everyone.

The Russian military journalist Alexander Kharchenko, who argues that Russian use of FPV drones was one of the causes of the failure of the Ukrainian counter offensive, suggested in January that the battle lines were more fluid than generally thought. 'The number of drones at the front is growing exponentially,' he wrote on Telegram. 'Dozens of "birdies" [drones] will fly at a single armoured vehicle, and a soldier can be chased by two or three.' Front-line trenches, he pointed out, were held at the expense of troops and vehicles ready to supply

them with food and ammunition and evacuate the wounded. If that supply chain couldn't make it the last mile to the trenches, the trenches would fall. 'The recipe for a breakthrough is extremely simple,' he wrote. 'Quadruple the number of FPV drones and concentrate them on a small section of the front. After supplies fail, you'll be able to weed out the exhausted [survivors] without much difficulty. Crucially, this scenario can be carried through with only a small investment of time and money. It's realistic. The main thing is to stay ahead of the enemy.'