

A LESSON IN MILITARY DOCTRINAL AND OPERATIONAL FAILURES: THE BATTLE OF HOSTOMEL AND THE RUSSIAN MILITARY'S FAILURE TO CAPTURE KYIV.

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Abstract: *This paper will examine the underlying doctrinal and operational factors that led to the failure of the Russian military to capture Kyiv, and its subsequent military implications that led to its (re)assessment of military strategy. Firstly, this paper will examine the historical lead-up to the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian War, detailing the relative political and strategic factors that impacted upon President Putin's decision to launch the 'Special Military Operation'. Secondly, this paper will go into detail into the relative military and tactical landscape of Russia's attempt to capture Kyiv, in particular, its failure to seize Hostomel airport, thereby leading to strategic failure. Thirdly, this paper will contend that the failure to capture Hostomel was based in part on operational factors but also upon the inability of Russian military planners to fully predict the Ukrainian resolve, as well as the limitations found in its doctrinal approach to warfare.*

Keywords: *Battle of Hostomel; Russo-Ukrainian War; Putin; Leadership; Doctrines; operational warfare.*

1. Core arguments of paper: The Kremlin's doctrinal limitations

Firstly, one must take a historical overview of the lead up to the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine to understand the underlying factors that led up to the fateful decision of President Putin to launch military action. Following the 'Orange Revolution' in Ukraine, the then pro-Russian leader was ousted and left the country. These political changes in the aftermath of the revolution led to the annexation of Crimea by Putin, and the start of the 'frozen conflict' in the Donbas region, with a 'hybrid war' waged by Russia. This is an important point to make, as this demonstrates again how wider geopolitical factors impacted upon the timing in the context of a window of opportunity for Russian military intervention. However, it was not until the advent of President Zelensky's administration in 2021, who was considered to be of pro-Western, EU orientation, that the change in Ukrainian leadership was a contributing factor that led to President Putin's fateful decision to launch the 'Special Military Operation' against Ukraine in February 2022.

In terms of military doctrine, one must first consider the concept of military strategy. A useful summary of what is deemed a successful military strategy is as follows: "Objectives are set for both the short term and long term. Those for the short term are about getting to the next stage: they must be realistic to be credible" (Freedman 2024, 56). However, it is the contention of this paper that Russia's war aims were based upon misperception of Ukrainian military resolve, as well as a mismatch between Russian initial objectives, and its actual warfighting capabilities on the ground – compounded by military setbacks and logistical challenges.

The underlying political objectives of Putin's decision-making are aptly described in this following quote: "Putin concluded that the situation was untenable. Unwilling to withdraw support from the enclaves and with no prospect that the position could be stabilized so long as the government in Kyiv was unwilling to make concessions and was looking for more support from NATO and the EU, Putin decided that the only way out was to change the government" (Freedman 2024, 64). President Putin held the perspective "that Ukraine was an artificial construct with an illegitimate government suppressing Russian language speakers" (Freedman 2024, 64). Therefore, these factors led to President Putin's decision to launch military invasion on Thursday, 24th February 2022 under the auspices of "demilitarisation and denazification", with the aim of eliminating the Zelensky administration and replacing it with a Pro-Russian leader.

My first key point in this article, and the main the crux of my argument, is as follows: on a political level the failure to capture Kyiv, as a result of the Battle of Hostomel, meant that Russian military objectives were subject to change – due in part to its enormous material casualties fighting

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a war of manoeuvre, which led to the Russian leadership deciding to wage a war of attrition. That being said, there is a further point to be had that Russia's failure to achieve strategic success is also found in its doctrinal culture exhibited in the Russian military's own organisational 'strategic culture' – that Russia is able to win a strategic victory through the use of overwhelming firepower against the enemy. The Russian military leadership took lessons from the First Gulf War, the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999, and its military intervention in Syria, as historical case studies. Thereby demonstrating the efficacy of the use of overwhelming firepower to bring about a desired strategic outcome.

Thus, the argument of this paper is that it is this doctrinal belief that underpinned Russia's initial wartime goal was based upon achieving decisive victory through use of superior firepower in the shortest time possible. However, warnings about the Ukrainian opposition was dismissed by the political and military leadership at the Kremlin. This also laid bare the fundamental mismatch between doctrinal aspirations and actual Russian military capabilities. However, this also has to do with Putin's leadership style and the micromanaging of military operations. As Plokyh argues in his book *The Russo-Ukrainian War*, the 'Special Military Operation' was based upon "Putin's belief in the nonexistence of the Ukrainian nation and the desire of Ukrainians to live under Russian rule", with the military operation itself "modeled on the Russian takeover of Crimea" (Plokyh 2023, 154). All of which, underpinned the emerging Russian military doctrine in the belief of a quick victory against Kyiv. However, as we shall see, the evolving military situation on the ground deemed this initial war objective unattainable.

By taking this quote into account, this paper argues this strategic failure to capture the airport, as well as further losses, were based upon the unrealistic expectations. Additionally, the lack of coordination between differing elements of the Russian invasion force meant that the chances of the Russian military being able to successfully launch an attack of Kyiv was, therefore, diminished. Furthermore, a wider qualification has to be made in that a "strategy involves a story about how a conflict can be decided in favorable terms" (Freedman 2024, 56). Furthermore, there was no 'Plan B' or contingency plan for the Russians to be able to revert to once the initial offensive failed in its objectives. The Russians launched a multi-pronged attack in the belief that the Kyiv regime would buckle early on. When this did not happen, its only recourse of action was to (re)calibrate its objectives towards narrower wartime goals.

The Kremlin's beliefs in a quick victory were based upon the employment of use of overwhelming firepower in a decisive fashion. However, an important point to make here is that there was a gap between the aspirations of the Russian leadership, influenced by its overall doctrine, and that of its actual available capabilities. This is seen through the use of air assets, cruise missiles, and decisive armoured thrusts, but this, in operational terms, could not be realised on the battlefield – due to material constraints and available firepower, not to mention the logistical and communication challenges besetting the initial Russian 'thrust'. However, another factor needs to be taken into consideration: that of the underestimation of the Ukrainian military resolve to resist the Russian invasion. This meant that its doctrinal beliefs in a quick victory were ill advised and based on the misperception of the Ukrainian resolve to resist the Russian military. Consequently, the Russians' inability to bring about combined warfare operations meant that it was unable to coordinate its activities in the kinetic battlespace environment. This inability to realise its operational doctrine led to the failure to achieve its initial objectives: that of the capture of Hostomel and the fall of the Kyiv regime.

2. The battle of hostomel&failure to capture antonov airport

"Russia's military strategy in Ukraine was informed by inaccurate intelligence assessments, leading to the development of unrealistic battleplans in the opening phase of the war" (de Dreuzy and Gilli 2022, 25).

The quote above demonstrates the misinformed nature of Russian military strategy, combined with intelligence failures and limitations in operational planning. The combination of its tactical shortcomings seen in its initial thrust into Ukraine, as well as its doctrinal failures, meant that the Russian military was unable to achieve its initial war aims. On the battlefield, Russian forces were

unable to capture Ukraine’s strategic, military and political centre – that of Kyiv, which was one of the core objectives of Russia’s Special Military Operation of "denazification", in essence, regime change. On March 25th, the Russian Ministry of Defense ordered Russian forces to withdraw from the outskirts of Kyiv and elsewhere, with more limited military objectives of focusing upon the Donbas and the Siege of Mariupol, the latter witnessing some of the fiercest fighting.

In terms of military operations, the aim was to capture the airport “with the help of a relatively small detachment of airborne troops and special forces” (Plokyh 2023, 160). From a tactical, operational level, linked to the capture of Hostomel airport was the objective of a future strategic airlift of Russian paratrooper reinforcements. The successful capture would “allow a much larger [Russian] paratroop force to land in the vicinity of Kyiv, capture the city’s bridges across the Dneiper River” (Plokyh 2023, 160). The aim of this objective was to “limit the ability of the Ukrainian armed forces to maneuver and move units through Kyiv’s transportation hub” (Plokyh 2023, 160).

The initial assault was based on Russian gunships with transport helicopters loaded with Russian elite paratroopers to storm the airport and seize control. In addition, pro-Russian Chechen forces, under the command of Kadyrov, failed in their efforts to assassinate President Zelensky during the Battle of Hostomel. (Plokyh 2023, 160). This, in turn, further enhanced Ukrainian resolve to meet the Russian invaders and launch a resolute defence.

One aspect of this was seen in the vulnerability of Russian gunships and transport helicopters to Ukrainian shoulder launched weaponry, during its initial assault. The use of air-assault tactics against Hostomel also proved challenging due to the vulnerability posed by Ukrainian soldiers firing shoulder launched MANPAD weaponry at helicopters. “Russia’s *operational plan* called for a rapid air assault into Hostomel Airport, while mechanized forces would concurrently advance on Kyiv from Belarus, on the western side of the Dnipro River, and from Russia, on the river’s eastern side” (Collins, Kofman, and Spencer 2023). The first two waves consisted of 2 helicopters that landed at Hostomel carrying Russian air-assault troops. However, during the “first wave, two helicopters were shot down by MANPADS” (Zabrodskiy, Watling, Danylyuk, and Reynolds 2022, 26). Although the Russian paratroopers flown in fought tirelessly in the initial capture of Antonov airport, they were unable to successfully repel Ukrainian counterattacks. This operational military failure meant that the Russian military was unable to secure a strategic ‘air bridge’ that would allow for reinforcements to be flown in by Il-76 transport aircraft. In addition, Russia was unable to achieve full air superiority, which also meant its helicopters and aircraft were vulnerable to Ukrainian anti-aircraft weaponry. Therefore, Russian elite paratroopers’ reinforcements coming in from Mi-8/17 helicopters came under heavy fire.

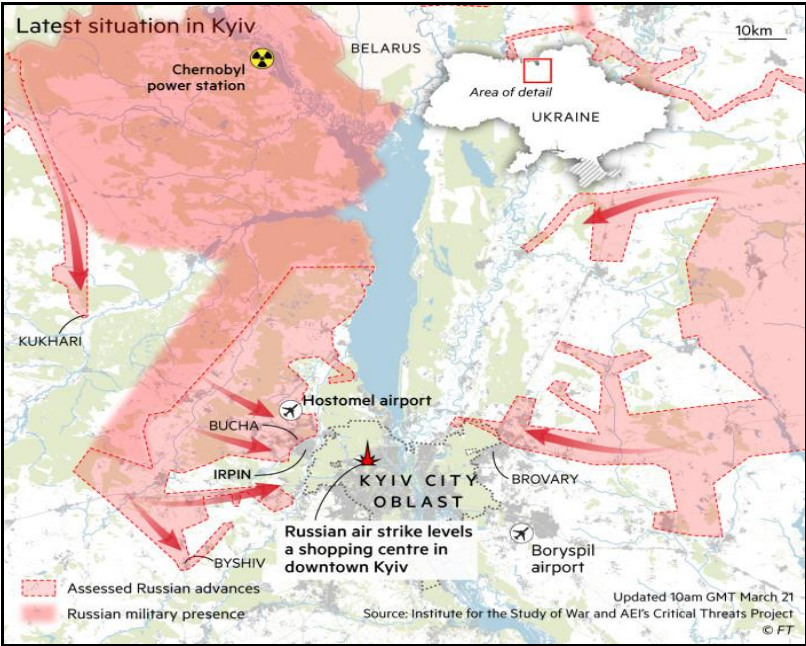


Figure 1.1: The Battle of Hostomel and the Extent of the Russian Advance March 21st 2022

Source: Image extracted from: (Rathbone, Foy and Jones 2022)

The image above shows the extent of the Russian military advance and its proximity to the Ukrainian capital. Due to the proximity of Hostomel airport, this was considered by Russian military command as vital to the effort to capture the Ukrainian capital. From a tactical, operational level, a future strategic airlift of Russian paratrooper reinforcements was linked to the capture of Hostomel airport.

An important aspect of the initial Russian invasion was based on the element of surprise, and contingent with the taking of Hostomel. As the Russian military lost the element of surprise, this hampered its overall military advance to Kyiv. Consequently, this led to the Kremlin's inability to fulfil its initial wartime objectives. Furthermore, the advancing Russian advance was beset by logistical challenges. This has been stated in the following quote by Collins, Kofman and Spencer who argued, "The failure at Hostomel was compounded by the slowness of the Russian advance from Belarus, which forced the Russian troops to attempt to seize the capital without the element of surprise, days behind schedule." (Collins, Kofman, and Spencer 2023). This allowed time for Ukrainians to hit the Russian tanks, armoured personnel carrier and other vehicles with shoulder weaponry, causing havoc among the Russian troops – with the effect of stopping its advance on Kyiv.

In terms of the Ukrainian ability to defend against the Russian onslaught, the Ukrainian military was successful in firing missiles and other projectiles against incoming Russian T-72 Main Battle tanks. These following operational challenges meant that Russia was unable to launch a mechanised armour storming of Kyiv by an overwhelming number of Russian military forces, due to the resistance being met by the Ukrainians launching shoulder-held weaponry and other missiles at incoming Russian armored units and mechanized infantry – resulting in high Russian casualties on the ground. However, tactical constraints and logistical challenges, as well as the failure to capture Hostomel, put this very much as unachievable militarily.

As the Russians were unable to achieve a strategic airlift at Hostomel airport, the Russians could not fly reinforcements, as well as their advanced team of paratroopers on Il-76 heavy lift aircraft, in order to capture Kyiv and install a pro-Russian leadership. In terms of military bureaucracy, there was an initial confusion in the Russian military operational leadership. Many Russian generals had to leave the safety of their bunkers to take operational control of their battle groups on frontlines. This in turn left the Russian generals vulnerable to Ukrainian sniper fire. Furthermore, in terms of micromanaging the ongoing military operational theatre, President Putin himself tried to interfere with tactical decisions – further reinforcing this confusion.

3. Moscow's failure to achieve its initial war aims: military&operations difficulties

The failure of Russia to achieve its initial war aims was based also on its inability to launch combined military operations - based on the coordination of air assets and armored units, followed by reinforcements including mechanized infantry and other support units. This is based in part, as earlier mentioned, on the misperception of a lack of Ukrainian resistance, which meant that "Russian forces advanced too quickly and haphazardly in their initial advance towards their targets" (de Dreuzy and Gilli 2022, 26). Also, further compounding Russia's military efforts was the lack of utilising its overall air capabilities and, as a result, did not fully eliminate Ukrainian air defenses. In effect, the Russians were not able to gain total 'air superiority' through lack of munitions, communications and logistics, as well as the inability to wage 'combined military operations'. This denotes the complete mismatch of its initial military objectives of a quick victory achieved through a 'blitzkrieg' style assault and its actual military capabilities, or in this case, the lack of coordination and utilisation of assets.

Furthermore, in terms of available firepower, the Russians "lacked the combat power to successfully seize the city", and as they moved to surround the Kyiv, the Russian army "came into range of more and more Ukrainian artillery units and exposed more of their depth to raiding" (Watling and Reynolds 2022, 4). Consequently, due to Russian tactical and strategic mistakes, the Ukrainian resistance was able to use rockets and other missiles to take out both trucks and armoured Russian tanks. The Russians suffered from high casualties at the battalion level due to Ukrainian anti-tank weaponry and the use of drone strikes striking the initial Russian armoured thrust

Another point to add is that the Ukrainian centre of its political leadership withstood the Russian onslaught in Kyiv, which led them to gain the political momentum for increased military aid from the West. By Kyiv showing defiance with Ukrainian troops fighting back against the Russian military advances towards the capital, further compounded Moscow’s inability to achieve its initial military objectives. As Watling and Reynolds state: “The Russians continued to advance, but at an increasingly heavy price, so that by the time they had secured Hostomel and were in place to launch an attack on Kyiv, it was clear that they lacked the combat power to successfully seize the city” (Watling and Reynolds 2022, 4).

NATO estimates place the Russian casualties “between 7,000 and 15,000 dead (many of these hard-to-replace officers) with thousands more wounded” (de Dreuzy and Gilli 2022, 27). In addition, as the military situation worsened, many Russian commanders moved closer to the front, leading to high casualties in its command. All of these factors are emblematic of intelligence failures, and limitations in Russian military doctrine. None of this was foreseen by Russian strategic and military planners. The combination of these factors, coupled with the complete lack of coordination and communication, along with the lack of combined arms operations by the Russians, led to the failure of this ‘blitzkrieg’ operation. Russian military underestimated the will of the Ukrainians to defy the invasion.

It was at the Battle of Hostomel and the Russian Army’s failure to capture Kyiv that ultimately led to the (re)assessment of Moscow’s strategic aims and military goals, as we shall see in the next section.

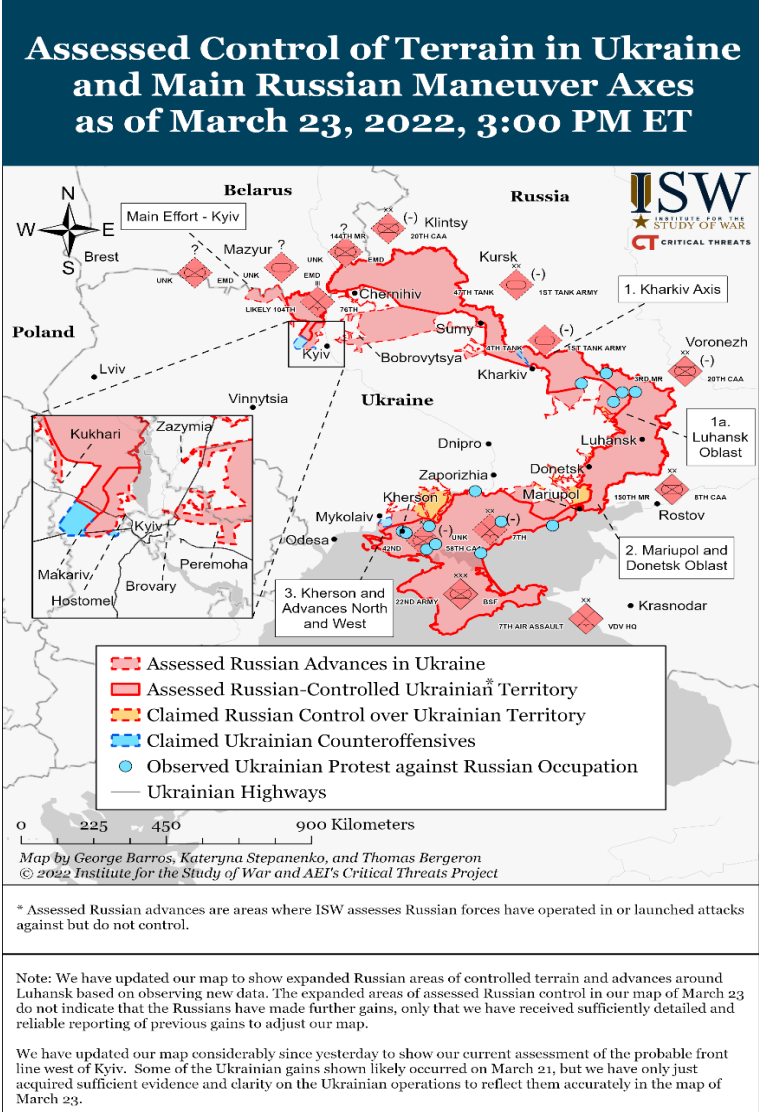


Figure 1.2. Battlefield Situation following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, 23rd March 2022

(Source: Image extracted from: (Kagan, Barros and Stepanenko 2022)

Instead, Russian military tactics changed. On an operational level, the Russian Army attempted to “encircle the capital, but in doing so came into range of more and more Ukrainian artillery units and exposed more of their depth to raiding” (Watling and Reynolds 2022, 4). The leadership at Kyiv concluded that “its centre of gravity was the capital and had prioritised its defence for artillery systems, air defences, anti-tank weapons and reserves” (Watlings and Reynolds 2022, 4). By the 23rd March, the military situation on the ground in Ukraine is depicted in Figure 1.2, as Russia shifted from offensive to defensive actions, while still on the outskirts of Kyiv. However, the Ukrainians have by this point started to go on the offensive and push the Russians back.

The Russian Army eventually left the airport on 2nd April 2022 after its failed offensive on Kyiv. Therefore, in terms of the situation on the ground, a combination of factors led to the failure of the Russian military to achieve its strategic objectives including the following: its inability to capitalise on its initial gains, logistical and tactical shortcomings, as well as limitations in its fighting doctrine. All of which combined led to a reassessment of its war aims

Lastly, the situation on the ground further changed, and the decision was made to withdraw from parts of Ukraine, and instead, focus on its main offensive in the Donbas. After the initial thrust “Russian forces withdrew many of their forces from around Kyiv after about four weeks of fighting and reduced their military operations to the south and east of the country” (de Dreuzy and Gilli 2022, 26). This led to Ukrainian forces regrouping and able to counter-attack, but Russia pulled back to its Southern Front and the Donbas, as seen in the Battle of Mariupol. This denotes a change in war aims, following the failure to capture Kyiv, which led to a reassessment of Grand Strategy, towards much narrower military objectives.

Thus, this paper concludes, from a Grand Strategy perspective, after the initial failure to achieve its ambitious military objectives, the underlying strategic objectives changed to that of ‘annexation’, and the subsequent continuation of the war in the form of ‘a war of attrition’. This is what I have written about in my other article instead, titled ‘*Russia’s embrace of attritional warfare*’, in this same journal edition. Next, this brings us to the nature of Russian strategy. Lawrence Freedman goes onto conclude that Russia’s efforts can be termed as a “bad strategy” (Freedman 2024, 67). This “includes the underestimation of an opponent. It may involve overreliance on some hunch about how others will act, or not thinking through the possible consequences of a course of action, or failure to work out how a good idea can best be implemented” (Freedman 2024, 67). Therefore, it is the argument of this paper that the combination of Russia’s doctrinal limitations is found in the following factors: its underestimation of Ukrainian resistance, as well as its belief in a quick victory, combined with the resultant military failures and a lack of a ‘Plan B’. This marked a new chapter in Russian operational thinking with its focus instead upon waging a war of attrition in Ukraine.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the Russian military failed in its initial objectives and, therefore, was unable to capture Kyiv, which was the centre of Ukrainian political and military leadership and power. Russia’s operational failures had two implications: political and strategic. The capture of Antonov Airport by Russian Paratroopers was deemed necessary to bring about a quick victory for Putin’s ‘Special Military Operation’, as it would then be able to reinforce its presence, and drive onto Kyiv. However, on a political level, Russia was unable to realise its initial war aims of ‘regime change’ in Kyiv, because it failed to capture the capital after the Battle of Antonov Airport (part of the wider Battle of Hostomel). On a strategic level, the failure to remove Zelensky was also part of the reason for the change in Grand Strategy. Consequently, Russia’s failure to decisively bring about a military victory and the inability to achieve its initial war aims contributed to a change in its overall Grand Strategy. The Russian Invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was based on the belief in a quick victory with the capture of Ukraine’s political centre, Kyiv – to achieve its overall military and political objectives. This was due in part to the underestimation of the Ukrainian resolve to resist, coupled with the wider doctrinal culture and operational limitations of the Russian military

– meant that, in effect, Russia failed to achieve its initial objectives. Furthermore, the Ukrainian ability to target tanks with missiles, and defend from an entrenched position, meant that Russia was unable to hold onto the airport and subsequently lost the Battle of Hostomel, and with it, the loss of a quick victory. Consequently, this led to the Kremlin reassessing its war aims and shifting its overall approach, by pursuing a protracted war of attrition against Ukraine.

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