

UKRAINE'S VOLUNTEER BATTALIONS

MAJ MICHAEL COHEN
SSG MATTHEW GREEN

Ordinary Ukrainians taking up arms to defend their country is nothing new. Ukraine has spawned several movements of irregular fighters throughout the last century. To fully appreciate this, we must examine Ukrainian history further back than 1991, the year that the USSR dissolved into 15 independent countries. During the brief existence of post-World War I independent Ukraine, irregular fighters including the “Free Cossacks” successfully aided Ukraine’s military leaders in frustrating Russian Bolshevik attempts to conquer Ukraine until 1921. During the street battles in Kyiv between the Ukrainian People’s Republic and Bolshevik forces in 1918, Bolshevik Commander V. Antonov considered the Free Cossacks to be among the Ukrainian Republic’s fiercest and most loyal fighters.¹ From 1942 until roughly 1956, the Ukrainian Resistance Army (UPA in Ukrainian) fought a long insurgency against Poland, Germany (WWII), and the Soviet Union without any external support. Using a combination of tactics borrowed from neighboring militaries, iron discipline, effective organization, and tight operations security (OPSEC), the group managed to inflict a higher mortality rate on Soviet soldiers and security officers than did the Soviet-Afghan War.² The red and black flag of the UPA can still be seen in many parts of West Ukraine today and has been adopted by some contemporary paramilitary formations to include Right Sector.

Background on the Current Crisis

In April of 2014, Russia illegally annexed the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine after an unrecognized referendum and an unacknowledged (at the time) Russian military intervention. Ukraine’s armed forces in Crimea quickly found their bases cut off or stormed by Russian troops but did not use force to oppose Russia’s actions.³ When armed, masked men started seizing government buildings in eastern Ukrainian cities in April, many observers expected a quick repeat of the Crimea scenario. Certainly, no armed resistance was met by the pro-Russian forces in the beginning. In fact, the true situation on the ground was even worse. According to the Ukrainian interior minister, up to 70 percent of police in the region had allowed or actively assisted the building takeovers.⁴ Eyewitnesses in Kramatorsk told journalists about how patriotic crowds gathered outside the city administration building to try and prevent its occupation by separatists. The police gave up the building anyways in cooperation with the heavily armed fighters once they arrived. Within a couple of days, the police were back at work, now following the orders of separatist authorities. At the Kramatorsk Airfield, outside the city, the local military garrison consisting of conscripts put up a sustained fight to defend the strategic object from repeated separatist attacks but were not prepared to attempt a storm of their occupied home city.⁵ Perhaps due to the low

public support that the separatists had in eastern Ukraine, or perhaps with the benefit of hindsight after seeing what happened in Crimea, groups of patriotic Ukrainians stopped waiting for the authorities to act and started to take matters into their own hands to actively fight the separatists.

Holding the Line

In the eastern Ukrainian city of Dnipropetrovsk, one of the first to take decisive action was the regional governor and billionaire businessman Ihor Kolomoiskiy. With permission from the Ministry of Interior, he put \$10 million of his own fortune into the creation of a battalion of volunteer fighters to keep the separatists from taking over the city in April 2014.⁶ Many of those who initially signed up were recent participants in the demonstrations on Maidan.⁷ The unit Kolomoiskiy equipped and funded, Dnipro 1, can largely be credited with preventing the city’s fall into the hands of the separatists. Dnipro 1 took up positions along major avenues of approach into the city to block the movement of separatists from the east. Additionally, battalion fighters performed presence patrols in the city and protected key government buildings. The unit also participated in operations outside of the city, allegedly burning a police station in Mariupol (and those inside it) to the ground while assisting another volunteer battalion (Azov) with retaking that city from separatists.⁸

Other volunteer battalions, including some of the more well-known ones, were created not long after. Donbas, composed mostly of natives of Donetsk and Luhansk, was formed in April 2014 and adopted by the Ukrainian national guard.⁹ Azov, a controversial battalion formed and led by radical far-right figure Andriy Biletskiy, was adopted by the Ministry of Defense in May.¹⁰ Aidar and other battalions followed quickly in June. By October 2014, more than 44 territorial defense battalions, 32 special police battalions, three volunteer national guard battalions, and at least three pro-Ukrainian unregulated battalions that answered officially to no one (Right Sector’s “Volunteer Ukrainian Corps”) had been stood up in Ukraine.

Equipment and Training

Initially, the volunteer battalions had to fight with what they had on hand. Uniforms were usually donated collections of mismatched camouflage patterns from different militaries around the world. The weapons used by battalions were as varied as the uniforms. Dnipro 1 was initially handed a collection of 300 AK-74 rifles, 30 M-16s, and crew-served weapons of different types and calibers. Donbas initially made do with old sniper rifles, hunting rifles, pistols, and some rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs). When the battalions were being formed, the question of arming them from government stores became a heated struggle between the Interior Ministry

(in favor) and the Minister of Defense (opposed the idea).¹¹ Many battalions went into battle ill-equipped against Russian-backed separatists in terms of ammunition and weapons. The Azov Battalion worked out a barter system with Ukrainian border guards and received weapons and ammunition through those channels, but other units like Shakhtarsk initially had no weapons with which to arm their fighters. In a reversal of the story portrayed by Russian propaganda, which stated that separatists were using captured Ukrainian equipment, some battalions such as Aidar and Azov ended up using captured Russian armored vehicles and tanks in their operations. With time and as more volunteer battalions were adopted by Ukrainian government ministries, arms and equipment began to arrive to the battalions.

Supporting the battalions logistically was initially a serious challenge for the Ukrainian government, and social media proved a method of grass-roots funding and assistance. Unit Facebook accounts and web pages solicited donations and sought volunteers, and people contributed in large amounts. Approximately 60-70 percent of funds required by the battalions were provided by private contributions. Volunteers provided medical assistance, meals, equipment, and items purchased both domestically and abroad. Offices were established in many cities to coordinate assistance. Many of these offices, especially in Kharkiv and Odesa, later became targets of bombing and arson attacks blamed on pro-Russian terrorists.

In the beginning, training for the volunteer battalions was mostly a secondary thought. Training varied greatly between the battalions, which were largely responsible for instructing their recruits. Some volunteers came with experience from prior military service in Soviet and Ukrainian forces, and volunteers with prior service arrived from other countries in the former USSR and elsewhere as well to help with training the inexperienced fighters. Azov drew in part upon foreigners with prior service from Europe (from Sweden, for example) for training, and boasted that its fighters received more time training with a weapon than recruits in the Ukrainian conventional forces.¹² In contrast, Aidar volunteers received a week of training before seeing combat for the first time, and those of Donbas initially received training over a couple of days at most. Units such as Donbas eventually hired foreign instructors on their own to try and raise their combat effectiveness.¹³

Culture of the Battalions

By conventional standards, the environment of the battalions could have been seen as seriously lacking in discipline. Ranks, if anyone had them, didn't command much authority on their own. Charisma, experience, and the ability to lead in combat were more important to the volunteers. Commanders didn't refer to themselves by their ranks, most of which had been given to them by either the Interior Ministry or Ministry of Defense shortly before but instead referred to themselves by position. For example, a battalion commander typically referred to himself as "KomBat," and company commanders

referred to themselves as "KomRota" (rota means company in Russian). When they had to work with regular Ukrainian forces, volunteers often joked sarcastically about how Ukrainian officers slept in comfortable, air-conditioned tents while soldiers slept under the stars.¹⁴ The volunteers all lived more or less under the same conditions, without regard to rank. The mismatched uniforms and beards of many of the volunteers also shocked some regular officers and soldiers who worked alongside them. What the volunteers may have lacked in conventional discipline and tactical proficiency, they made up in will to fight.

The potential to fight the separatists was a powerful draw to the battalions, especially for those who otherwise could not officially join the fight. Alyona, a 21-year-old female in the Shakhtarsk volunteer battalion, initially joined the Ukrainian national guard, but said in an interview: "That was roadblocks and checking documents. I wanted to fight."¹⁵ Women in volunteer battalions, in contrast to the regular Ukrainian armed forces, took an active part in combat. In the Shakhtarsk battalion, women and men ate together, shared living quarters, and fought side by side. Donbas formed an all-female combat unit in the summer of 2014, and informed volunteers that standards and requirements would remain the same as for men.¹⁶ Many of the women fighters, such as one interviewed from Aidar, had been protesters on Maidan in Kyiv and left with their friends to fight in the east when the time came.¹⁷ Having shared the experience on Maidan together with their male friends, they couldn't imagine not going east with them. The combat performance of women in the volunteer units even re-energized a larger societal debate in Ukraine about whether or not to allow female conventional soldiers into combat roles. The arguments for were readily at hand and already coming from experience in east Ukraine.

Performance

From the beginning, volunteer battalions were on the front lines often ahead of the regular units they were doctrinally supposed to follow and support. They conducted reconnaissance behind separatist lines, called for and adjusted fire from conventional artillery units, and carried out skirmishing to test the strength of separatist positions. The battalions were often indistinguishable from separatist units, and Donbas successfully passed themselves off as separatists in their escape from the Ilovaisk Massacre in August 2014. Against similarly armed and trained separatists, the battalions successfully cleared towns and villages in the east after intense but short bouts of urban combat. The volunteer battalions took heavy casualties, and senior officers and NCOs were out front and frequently among the wounded, killed, and captured as unit pages and Facebook accounts attest. In the Battle of Ilovaisk, for instance, the commanders of the Dnipro, Donbass, Kharkiv, and Kherson battalions were either killed or wounded in the fighting.

Ilovaisk Massacre

By mid-August 2014, much of the separatist-held areas had been recaptured, lines of communications between Donetsk

and Luhansk had been severed, and the self-proclaimed separatist republics were facing imminent defeat. Led by the Donbas, Dnipro, and Azov battalions, Ukrainian forces entered the city of Ilovaisk in the early morning of 19 August and raised the Ukrainian flag over the city administration building. Intelligence estimates had predicted limited resistance from small elements of separatist fighters — after all, the war (technically an anti-terrorism operation) was considered almost won. After a day's worth of urban fighting, approximately half the city was under Ukrainian control. Fighting unexpectedly intensified later on the 20th, and Ukrainian forces in Ilovaisk settled into hasty defensive positions amidst repeated separatist counterattacks. From 24-26 August, separatist fighters, assisted by Russian regular military units which had recently crossed the Ukrainian border, encircled the city and prevented the arrival of Ukrainian relief elements.¹⁸ A withdrawal of forces was negotiated with, and quickly broken by, the Russians and separatists surrounding Ilovaisk. Retreating columns of volunteers and Ukrainian regulars were canalized into prepared kill zones and ambushed, sustaining tremendous losses. As of 21 August, 25 percent of all volunteer battalion losses in the fight in the east had occurred at Ilovaisk.¹⁹ That figure from the Interior Ministry was calculated before the withdrawal-turned-deliberate-ambush had taken place.

After the Battle of Ilovaisk, the tide had definitely turned in favor of the Russians (saying separatists would be untrue, since by this time most fighters were either Russian volunteers or Russian active military).²⁰ Rounds of intense blame-laying and finger-pointing ensued between the commanders of the volunteer battalions, the active military leadership, and the politicians. For their part, the volunteer commanders blamed the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior leadership for failing to send promised relief to fighters trapped in Ilovaisk. Important to note, however, is that most of the volunteer battalion fighters ordered to fight in Ilovaisk failed to show up in strength (or show up at all), and that one battalion (Priкарпатиya) allegedly broke and ran under fire, collapsing a key flank during the battle.²¹ Some volunteer commanders expressed the opinion that they had been racing to capture towns and villages at breakneck speed on the orders of officials back in Kyiv attempting to take credit for winning the fight. They argued that the intelligence which led to their assault on Ilovaisk had been faulty, and the predictions of success premature. Optimism, in other words, had adversely affected the plan. Official inquiries followed for months afterwards, blame continued to be apportioned, and the Ukrainian Minister of Defense was even replaced after the battle. None of these actions could change the result of the battle itself, however. The high tide of the volunteer battalions had receded. The fighting would assume a much different face from then on. The volunteer battalions, although still taking part in fighting the battles to come, would become expanded and professionalized into altogether different fighting forces than they had once been.²²

Conclusion

In the aftermath of Ilovaisk, it is tempting for critics to

highlight the deficiencies of the volunteer battalions. Their indiscipline, poor equipment, lack of standardized training, uneven integration/cooperation with regular forces, and political activism (and in the case of Azov, repugnant far-right ideology) come under frequent attack. When faced with trained and equipped conventional forces, such as at Ilovaisk, the volunteers proved a less-than-equal match. Added to this list can be allegations of corruption, smuggling, and looting, which have hounded some battalions such as Shakhtarsk (disbanded as a result) and Tornado. Right Sector, which resisted subordination to Ukrainian control until the very end, wound up in a shootout with Ukrainian police in west Ukraine in July 2015 that many allege was over control of illegal cigarette smuggling routes.²³ All of that aside, the Ukrainian volunteer battalions need to be given due credit for their accomplishments. They rose to fight for Ukraine when Ukraine's military could not do so in a coordinated fashion (paralyzed by a rapid change of government and fast-moving events on the ground), fought the separatists using similar tactics and equipment, and sent a message to Russia that ordinary Ukrainians were willing to take up arms to defend their land. Most crucially, the volunteer battalions bought Ukraine time. Ukraine had time to complete several waves of mobilization, time to reorganize its interior and military forces after a long period of neglect, time to conduct reinvigorated training, and time to clean traitors from its military and civilian ranks. Ukraine had time for international sanctions to begin to bite Russia and time for locals in Donetsk in Luhansk to begin to regret what the Russians and separatists had brought them.²⁴ They held the line and prevented further destabilization and occupation of further Ukrainian provinces. They showed that the last line of defense in any country is a loyal citizenry willing to take up arms in its defense.

Notes

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MAJ Michael Cohen is a U.S. Army foreign area officer assigned to the Defense Intelligence Agency, Washington, D.C. He is fluent in Russian and Ukrainian languages.

SSG Matthew Green is currently serving as a conventional arms control inspector and weapons specialist with the Defense Threat Reduction Agency-Europe. He has served in various tactical leadership positions with units including the 3rd Battalion, 116th Infantry Regiment; 1st Squadron, 151st Cavalry Regiment; and 1st Battalion, 506th Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division.
