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By Jan Kallberg

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Both armies in the coming offensive have strengths, but only one encourages young officers to think for themselves.



Sheer weight of metal and manpower make a difference to major military operations. But just as important are the young men and women on the battlefield whose tactics implement the bigger strategy. Their leadership is critical.

The coming Ukrainian offensive will pit the two sides' tactical leaders against each other. Differences in education, doctrine, grit, and morale will make a difference that determines victory or defeat.

There are identifiable Russian weaknesses, but the Ukrainians also have their fair share of disadvantages.

Russian officers are specialists. You can spend your whole career on a single weapon system or a single set of tasks. This produces highly knowledgeable officers with little adaptability or interchangeability in duties.

Russian officers follow a career path in a single or closely related branch from beginning to end. An armor officer might lead mechanized infantry, and a paratrooper might lead reconnaissance, but significant shifts in career — say going from air defense to mechanized infantry — are extremely rare. Either you are in a maneuver or support unit, and you remain in that realm.

Russian losses of junior officers, killed, wounded, and medically unfit for continued service since February 24 2022 have been very significant.

Like any army suffering massive junior officer losses, Russia's first solution has been to reassign junior officers from other branches to the ground combat force. There's an obvious problem — these reassigned people are likely ill-prepared for the task since they come from different specializations. This will make them more passive and risk-averse, more inclined for example to employ static defense, because of their unfamiliarity with ground combat.

Static defense requires nothing more than understanding that you hold the terrain and engage enemies that enter it, and that might work if Ukrainian assault units lose momentum and the fight is slowed down. On the other hand, if the Ukrainians break through the defense lines and the fight becomes rapid, mobile, and highly intensive, then these passive and untrained leaders become a recipe for disaster.

This is key to success. The Ukrainians must maintain momentum forcing the Russians to leave their static prepared positions or get encircled and overrun. The Russians must only have two choices — bad and worse. Mobility and forward momentum are essential for Ukrainian success, not only on a strategic level but to force untrained Russian leaders to make bad decisions leading to massive casualties.

Suppose the Ukrainians breach the Russian defense line, which appears to collapse. In that case, their static and inexperienced tactical leaders are made to choose the historically high-risk and high-casualty option of a hasty, disorganized retreat under fire. Ukrainian mobility will give them no choice given their inexperience. This is an exploitable vulnerability.

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The Russian armed forces have adopted a second approach to bolster junior officer numbers. Russian military academies have ordered early graduation, and are concurrently sending military instructors to the front. That provides an influx of officers without full training and a smaller number of experienced men from the military academies. Still, this is obviously just a quick fix; it undermines any longer-

term solution because the ability to train new and able officers drops, and there are only a limited number of instructors who can be sent to the front. This decision can reasonably be seen as a sign of desperation.

A third approach is field promotions, where non-commissioned officers (NCOs) are promoted to become commissioned officers. Of course, there are numerous qualified non-commissioned and lower rank officers who can be promoted once they have proven themselves capable. However, they often lack the training and experience to enable combined arms — the orchestration of direct and indirect fires, and movement — which is necessary for victory on the modern battlefield. There is no guarantee that effectiveness as a platoon commander translates to effectiveness as a company commander. Field promotions will fill the ranks but not solve the competence deficit.

That said, it must be remembered that multiple hundreds of Russian junior officers are still fighting and have gained significant combat experience during the last year. Their mental stamina and balance have been tested as numerous comrades have died. They have witnessed catastrophic events such as exploding T-72s, and artillery strikes, and will have suffered their own close calls. The core group of surviving Russian junior officers should not be underestimated. As a historical example, the initial German onslaught in the Battle of the Bulge 1944-1945 against inexperienced American troops at the beginning of the offensive was led by highly experienced German junior officers who had been fighting for several years, giving the Germans the initial upper hand.

Russian company commanders who have survived until now likely have advanced skills. Battalion and regiment commanders can hide in a bunker; company commanders cannot and have to move between platoons to keep the momentum going, meanwhile exposing themselves to enemy fire.

The Ukrainian army faces similar issues as it has expanded from a relatively small pre-2022 force of around 200,000 to a mass citizen army. This means new officers are filling the ranks. Ukrainian staff officers decided to build their new Western-equipped assault brigades from the remains of units that had suffered heavy losses, but this threatens a lack of cohesion worsened by an experience deficit. Assault is the second-most complicated tactical task after river crossings. A wild card in the Ukrainian counter-offensive is tactical leadership ability and its consistency across the new, assaulting units. I suspect there will be significant differences and that these will become apparent once the engagement has started.

The lack of training for the new Ukrainian forces is also a vulnerability. Based on experience from drafted units in the Nordic countries, training a platoon commander from scratch takes at least 12-15 months, a squad leader close to a year, and a rifleman seven-to-eight months. The new Ukrainian platoon and squad leaders will have far less training, even if some have previous experience.

In the counter-offensive, it will be critical for senior Ukrainian commanders to quickly identify the units led by commanders able to deliver success, and then place their bets on these units. If there is a Ukrainian breakthrough, it is essential to prioritize those units and leaders who can spearhead to maintain forward momentum. If this can be maintained, following Liddell-Hart's classic indirect approach — “that frontal assaults and massive showdowns are to be avoided; instead aim at the enemy's line of least expectation” — the Russian front can crumble.

The war in Ukraine has created some highly capable Ukrainian and Russian junior officers, but numerous Ukrainians in these ranks have died, along with a majority of

Russian junior officers. This has forced both armies to refill the ranks with mobilized and less-trained tactical leaders.

The outcome of the anticipated Ukrainian counteroffensive depends on the degrees of freedom and resources the most capable junior officers are given to maneuver, engage, and destroy enemy units – and to maintain the momentum. As in the Battle of Britain, this fight is being determined by Ukraine’s “few” leading a limited number of reorganized and well-equipped units (since the bulk of both armies have been ground down and are unable to mount intense offensive action.)

Russians too will need highly capable officers commanding their reserves so they can close any breaches created by Ukrainian assault formations. This will be difficult since there are few capable reserves and even fewer surviving, skilled commanders.

Two factors will decide the war this summer – commander initiative and the degrees of freedom to act – combined in mission-driven tactics (referred to in German as *Auftragstaktik*, which emphasizes decentralized command) as the fight becomes intense and volatile, regaining mobility and maneuvering with great uncertainty in the fog of war.

In this sense, the Ukrainians certainly have an advantage that will offset the Russians’ still sizeable but overly rigid force.

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