

Chapter 8: Operational-Tactical Approach of the Russian Army in the 2022 Ukraine War

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Abstract

Since the invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces on February 24, 2022, the use of mechanized formations, massive artillery, and the hitherto unheard-of mass deployment of ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and drones has become part of everyday life in Ukraine. The Russian “battalion tactical group” is now also receiving increased public attention, but its success is questioned in contrast to 2014.

Keywords

Russian war of aggression, battalion tactical group (BTG), “special operation”, Donbas, “Russian steamroller”, Western weapons systems, mobilization, Ukrainian offensive in Kharkiv and Kherson

1 Introduction

The combat and tactical deployment of Russian forces has been the subject of public comment and debate since the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian troops.¹ The structure and deployment of the Russian battalion tactical group (BTG) in the Donbas is the subject of ongoing military assessments. Indeed, a current assessment alone falls short. It is critical to also consider the invasion of Ukraine by Russian troops in the summer of 2014. At that time, several Russian BTGs were deployed for the first time. The success of the Russian invasion of Ukraine at that time was the basis for planning for the Russian attack in February 2022. The deployment of Russian BTGs

¹ Zagorodnyuk, Andriy: “Ukrainian victory shatters Russia’s reputation as a military superpower”, Atlantic Council, 13 September 2022.

in the summer of 2014 led the Russian General Staff to believe that their use could be successfully brought to bear under the right conditions and in compliance with operational doctrines and reasonable tasking. The successes of the battles in the Donbas in 2014 and 2015 convinced the Russian side that simultaneous attacks conducted narrowly and deeply on multiple fronts can provide a desired rapid advance. It can therefore be assumed that the planning of the Russian attack on February 24, 2022, was quite significantly influenced by this experience.²

Yet the Ukrainian side also learned its lessons. The Ukrainian General Staff realized that it was not possible to repel invading Russian forces in the immediate vicinity of the border. Already the deployment of Russian artillery from the Russian territory could not be countered, since any counterfire would have provided an immediate reason to invade. The following simultaneous approach, on the other hand, could not be repelled, especially in the open and flat border area. It was thus clear that in the event of a renewed Russian attack, any defensive success could only be achieved in the depths of Ukrainian territory. The Russian enemy therefore had to be allowed into the country in order to be fought there in a targeted manner.³

2 *The Russian Battalion Tactical Group (BTG)*

The war in Georgia in 2008 showed that, from the Russian point of view at the time, the division and regiment structure was not very suitable for modern operational command. As a result of the reform process of the Russian armed forces that began in 2008, the brigades or regiments were given the task of using the available professional cadres to form small, *ad hoc* deployable units, so-called “BTGs”. The first deployment of these forces took place when Russian forces invaded Ukraine in the summer of 2014. The BTG is a tactical formation that is essentially a reinforced combat battalion. It consists of mechanized and motorized infantry and

2 Reisner, Markus/Hahn, Christian: Die russische Dampfwalze – Eine erste Zwischenbewertung. In: *Truppendienst*, Vol. 3, Vienna 2022.

3 Jensen, Benjamin: “Ukraine’s rapid advance against Russia shows mastery of 3 essential skills for success in modern warfare”, *Yahoo News*, 16 September 2022; Poulsen, Niels Bo/Staun, Jørgen (Eds.): *Russia’s Military Might – A Portrait of its Armed Forces*. Djøf Publishing: Copenhagen 2021.

battle tanks, extremely strong artillery elements as well as reconnaissance, engineer, anti-aircraft, electronic warfare, and supply elements.⁴

The BTG can independently conduct linked-arms combat but is hardly in a position to implement major operations without appropriate logistical support. Due to its self-sufficiency, the BTG has only a limited ability to conduct “deep operations”, which was previously possible at the division level at the earliest. In such tasks, BTG commanders are confronted with situations involving the coordination of a wide variety of weapons and troop types and the need to ensure complex logistical planning. This requires a high level of training. From the perspective of the Russian armed forces, the deployment of BTGs in Ukraine in 2014 was a success. They wanted to replicate this success in February 2022.⁵

3 Phase 1: The Russian Attack on February 24, 2022

On February 24, 2022, Russian troops invaded Ukraine in a “special operation” declared by President Putin himself. The prelude was targeted cyberattacks and air strikes against the political and military leadership’s communications infrastructure, fixed long-range air defenses and air forces as well as an attempted decapitation strike in Kyiv.⁶ The use of Russian long-range precision weapons was scaled. This is an indication that large and sustained Ukrainian resistance was not expected. The nearly 200,000 Russian troops assembled in the months leading up to the attack were deployed in five major force groupings. Each force grouping was provided by one of Russia’s five military districts. The Western, Southern, Central, Northern, and Eastern Military Districts each formed forces ranging in strength from 30,000 to 50,000 troops. The headquarter of a military district is capable of conducting its own inter-force operation. It can also employ its own organic resources for all required areas of effect. The military districts are under the control of the Joint Strategic Command in Moscow in peacetime as well as in action. The latter had defined the combat tasks of the five attacking force groupings before the attack began

4 Reisner/Hahn, Die russische Dampfwalze, 2022.

5 Reisner, Markus: Krieg in der Ukraine – Die “Bataillonstaktische Gruppe” im Angriff, Österreichs Bundesheer, 17 March 2022.

6 Kofsky, Jeremy: “An Airfield too far: Failures at Market Garden and Antonov Airfield”, Modern War Institute, 5 May 2022.

on February 24, 2022. Each military district command was therefore tasked with independently winning the set attack target.⁷

3.1 Deployment of Combined Armies

The Russian armed forces have a total of twelve so-called “combined armies”. These are the link between the military district headquarters and the divisions, brigades, and regiments. The combined armies perform the functions of operational-tactical headquarters. All twelve combined armies were involved in the “special operation” in Ukraine from the beginning. They were additionally reinforced by other forces (e.g. airborne units and artillery units, as well as paramilitary units “Rosgvardia” and a private military company “Wagner Group”). The respective combined army was composed in its structure so that it could fulfill the task assigned to it. The invasion of Ukraine was carried out in the following structure:⁸

Force Grouping “Kyiv Northwest” (provided by the Eastern Military District):

- 35th and 36th Combined Armies;
- Parts of the 98th and 106th Airborne Division

Force Grouping “Kyiv Northeast” (provided by the Central Military District):

- 2nd and 41st Combined Army;
- Parts of the 98th and 106th Airborne Division

Force Grouping “Kharkiv” (provided by the Western Military District):

- 6th and 20th Combined Armies;
- 1st Guard Tank Army

⁷ Reisner, Markus: Der Krieg um die Ukraine – Die Schlacht im Donbass. Eine Kurz-zusammenfassung nach 70 Tagen. In: Austria Institut für Europa und Sicherheitspolitik (AIES), Focus 4/2022, 5 May 2022.

⁸ Reisner/Hahn, Die russische Dampfwalze, 2022; Poulsen/Staun, Russia’s Military Might, 2021.

Force grouping “Donbas” (provided by the Southern Military District):

- 8th and 49th Combined Armies;
- Parts of the 150th Motor Rifle Division

Force Grouping “Crimea” (provided by the Southern Military District):

- 58th Combined Army;
- Parts of the 76th Airborne Division

In addition, there was the “Brest” force grouping with brigade-sized forces from each of the 5th and 29th combined armies. At the time of the invasion, a combined army usually consisted of two to four brigades. Most of them were mechanized infantry brigades, in rare cases armored brigades. In addition, there were missile, artillery, anti-aircraft, engineer, reconnaissance, NBC, electronic warfare (EW), telecommunications as well as logistics units. There was not always enough equipment available. Thus, often only individual TOS-1 rocket launchers, but not entire batteries, were assigned to the units. A brigade or regiment formed up to two BTGs. A combined army has an average of eight to ten BTGs. A special feature was the 1st Guards Tank Army. This consisted of the 2nd Motor Rifle Division, the 4th Armored Division, the 47th Guards Tank Division, and the 27th Motor Rifle Brigade. These units formed nearly twenty BTGs.⁹

3.2 The Defensive Success of Ukraine

In the first days, the Russian advance proceeded swiftly. However, in contrast to the attack by Russian forces in August 2014, this time Ukrainian conventional forces did not attempt to stop the Russian army near the border. In 2014, this resulted in the massive Ukrainian casualties mentioned earlier. This time, the Russian forces marched in and were only slightly engaged by the Ukrainians in delaying action for the time being. Russian formations were allowed to advance for nearly a week until their supply lines were overstretched and vulnerable without security. Targeted bridge blasts caused further delays. Then Ukrainian Special Operations Forces and National Guard units struck. In dozens of ambushes and in concert with armed drones, they destroyed Russian supply convoys that were on

⁹ Reisner, Der Krieg um die Ukraine – Die Schlacht im Donbass, 5 May 2022.

the move.¹⁰ In addition, there was the decentralized use of their own artillery combined with a time- and space-optimized system of fire request (software application GIS “Arta” or “Kropyva”). When, after five days, the Russian forces took a first operational break to refresh themselves, they found that they had been cut off from supplies. The troops now had to be deployed to provide security. These forces were missing from the units on the fronts from this point on.¹¹

Here, the limitations of the Russian BTGs quickly became apparent. In the face of adversity, the Russian side abandoned individual weapon systems (e.g. entire anti-aircraft batteries) and took fuel from the abandoned vehicles in order to be able to continue advancing by looting Ukrainian gas stations. This was especially evident in the north and northeast. In the flat terrain of the south, where Ukraine had not blown up all bridges on the extensive river system as planned,¹² the advance continued apace. Mariupol was encircled by the end of the first week. The first weeks of the war, however, were marked by reports of success on the Ukrainian side. Images of burning Russian tanks and infantry fighting vehicles and of successful attacks on supply and resupply convoys of Russian forces dominated the media. In particular, the low proportion of infantry forces in the Russian BTGs was now causing major breakdowns within them.¹³ It became increasingly obvious that the BTG’s outline – guarantor of success in 2014 – was unable to successfully complete the required combat tasks.¹⁴

10 Reisner, Markus: Der Einsatz von Drohnen im Ukrainekrieg, Österreichs Bundesheer, 28 April 2022.

11 Reisner, Markus: Der Einsatz der ukrainischen Artillerie. In: Truppendienst – Magazin des Österreichischen Bundesheeres, 29 June 2022; Reisner, Markus: Die Erfolgs geschichte der ukrainischen Artillerie, Österreichs Bundesheer, 19 May 2022.

12 Karpyuk, Oleksandr: “Історія оповита чутками: чому не підірвали міст з Кримом” [History is full of rumors: Why didn’t they blow up the bridge to Crimea?], Focus.ua, 16 May 2022.

13 Reisner, Markus: Erfolgreiche Abwehr einer russischen Kampfgruppe in einem Vorort von Kiew, Österreichs Bundesheer, 10 March 2022.

14 Reisner/Hahn, Die russische Dampfwalze, 2022; Spencer, John/Collins, Liam: “Waterworld: How Ukraine flooded three rivers to help save Kyiv”, Modern War Institute, 1 July 2022.

4 Phase 2: The Formation of a New Russian Heavyweight

After initial successes and with the increasing arrival of intelligence data and weapons supplies from the U.S. and NATO, Ukrainian forces first went on the offensive in early April. Breakdowns in the Russian command cadres began to increase. Ukrainian forces managed to decisively delay and even sustainably repel the all-out assault by Russian forces in the Kyiv, Chernihiv, and Sumy areas of northern and northeastern Ukraine. At the end of the sixth week, therefore, there was a change of strategy in the Russian operational command. After several weeks of operations, it was clear that the planned “deep engagement” by Russian forces had failed. The assault by five force groupings on four fronts had failed. The siege of Kyiv had to be abandoned on the west and east banks of the Dnipro after nearly forty days. Kharkiv, a significant railroad hub and major operational target (expressed by the approach of the Russian 1st Guards Tank Army), also withstood the attacks. With the help of fighter aircraft, drones, cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles, Russian forces continued to destroy targeted weapons caches, artillery, and communications nodes in Ukraine, but on the ground the offensive stalled.¹⁵

The Russian leadership now set an attack on the Donbas as an achievable goal. The “special operation” was to be continued successfully by forming a new center of gravity. Russian troops therefore attempted to move the central heavyweight to the Donbas starting in the sixth week of the war. There, a preliminary decision was to be sought in a new phase of the war by encircling the Ukrainian forces. Within ten days, beginning in the seventh week, the forces of the two northern force groupings (a total of four combined armies and airborne units with still a total of 40,000 to 50,000 troops at that point) were moved by rail to the Donbas, nearly 1,000 km away. Here, a regrouping of forces took place. After the Russian forces withdrew to Belarus and Russia by early April, the western and eastern banks of the Dnipro River near Kyiv to the Belarus border could be retaken by Ukraine. This was celebrated as a great success. Meanwhile, in the Donbas, Russian troops were preparing for the next phase.¹⁶

15 Reisner, Markus: Der Krieg um die Ukraine – Eine Bilanz nach 40 Tagen, Österreichs Bundesheer, 4 April 2022; Reisner, Der Krieg um die Ukraine – Die Schlacht im Donbass, 5 May 2022.

16 Reisner, Markus: Ukraine Krieg: “Zum Sterben zu viel, zum Leben zu wenig”, Österreichisches Bundesheer, 17 August 2022.

4.1 The “Russian Steamroller”

In the Donbas, the Russian forces were now to attempt to force a regional decision at the line of contact by encircling the Ukrainian forces. Targeted advances from the Izyum and Volnovakha areas were to form a pocket with a northern and southern perimeter. From the ninth week, therefore, Russian forces began attacking in the Donbas in a pincer movement from the north (south of Izyum) and south (southwest of Donetsk). The approach was now slow, broad, and with massive artillery support. For this purpose, the forces were completely reorganized. Two to three BTGs were combined into regimental combat groups. Combat support was spun off, consolidated into separate groupings, and additional artillery was brought in from Russia. The overall command of the operation was handed over to two military districts. Thus, the Kharkiv to Donbas area and the Kherson to Mariupol-North area are under one command. Since it was already operating in the Donbas, the southern military district took command there. The Russian advance is slow (at about 1.5 kilometers per day), in combat form, with infantry support and extensive artillery preparatory fire. As a rule, Russian units fight for just around five days before being rotated out. Rotation and the start of the attack are accompanied by massive artillery fire. Even during the advance, any detected resistance is suppressed with artillery fire as a priority. The objective of an encirclement has also been made spatially shorter.¹⁷

Until the twelfth week, the Russian pincer movements hardly gained any ground, nevertheless, day by day steady gains in terrain were achieved. Along the river Siverskyi Donets fierce battles raged. With the help of pontoon bridges, both sides kept trying to advance at unexpected places. In the night of May 5/6, 2022, this new traditional operation finally gained ground. At Popasna, the Russian forces achieved the decisive breakthrough for the time being. It was finally possible to form a cauldron measuring 40 by 40 kilometers in mid-May.¹⁸ This was squeezed to a narrowness of 20 kilometers on the western edge and thus operationally closed, for the Ukrainian supply lines were now under control of Russian artillery fire.¹⁹

17 Reisner, Der Krieg um die Ukraine – Eine Bilanz nach 40 Tagen, 4 April 2022.

18 Reisner, Markus: Der Krieg um die Ukraine – Die Schlacht im Donbass I, Österreichs Bundesheer, 20 May 2022.

19 Reisner, Markus: Die Schlacht im Donbass II – Eine Bilanz nach 96 Tagen, Österreichs Bundesheer, 30 May 2022.

To counter the fierce Russian attacks in the Donbas, the Ukrainian side attempted to hit Russian forces in inconvenient locations. To this end, localized counteroffensives were launched in April and May 2022 in the area north and northeast of Kharkiv and near Kherson. All attacks were repelled by Russian forces. Here, too, Russian troops took a force-saving approach to defense. Thus, they often fell back on defensible terrain.²⁰

5 Phase 3: The Ukrainian Counterattack

Since the end of August 2022, the Ukrainian armed forces have been able to achieve further sustained successes against Russian troops thanks to the offensives in Kherson and Kharkiv. In order to understand how this was possible against the supposed superiority of Russian troops, both Ukrainian offensives will now be examined in more detail. The four factors of terrain, forces employed, time, and information serve as the starting point for the analysis of the two offensives.

5.1 The Offensive in the Kherson to Lyman Area

The Ukrainian offensive in the Kherson region of southern Ukraine began on August 29, 2022, and the volatile fighting continues to this day.²¹

Factor Terrain

Already at the beginning of the war the Russian forces were able to capture the western bank of the Dnipro River. Since then, they have held a bridgehead there that stretches from the mouth of the Dnipro River in the southwest through the city of Kherson to the northeast. In July and August 2022, the Ukrainians managed to deploy forces to create the conditions for a possible offensive. The preparatory phase was mainly characterized by the attempt to isolate the Russian bridgehead. The goal was to destroy the three main crossing points over the Dnipro River – a bridge near

20 Reisner, Markus: Die Schlacht im Donbass III – Luhansk ist gefallen – Eine Bilanz nach 170 Tagen, Österreichs Bundesheer, 8 July 2022.

21 Reisner, Markus: Alles auf eine Karte – Die ukrainischen Offensiven in Charkiv und Cherson, Österreichs Bundesheer, 12 September 2022.

Kherson, a railroad bridge near it, and another bridge near a power plant to the east. These three bridges represented bottlenecks for the supply of Russian troops. After this *shaping*, the Ukrainians' intention was to tie down the Russian forces with two attacks to the north and south. After that, it was intended to form two cauldrons between the Dnipro River and the Ukrainian forces with a central thrust. Subsequently, it would have been the intention of the Ukrainian forces to break one encirclement after the other.²²

Factor Force

The weapons systems supplied by the West were an essential prerequisite for the possible success of the offensive. Particularly worthy of mention should be the T-72 tanks supplied from Poland and the Czech Republic, as well as BMP infantry fighting vehicles. These formed the spearhead of the attacks. The multiple rocket launcher system HIMARS, on the other hand, also proved effective in destroying the bridges. The use of mobile artillery, such as the Polish KRAB system, was also essential. The attacks themselves were carried out by three mechanized battle groups and, more importantly, mobile units designed to enable the Ukrainians to quickly take possession of sections of terrain after a breakthrough. The example of HIMARS illustrates the impact of Western weapons systems. As of October 2022, some 16 multiple rocket launcher systems have been delivered to Ukraine, which were used to attack more than 400 Russian targets. This had a major impact on the logistics of Russian troops, as important ammunition depots and bases were destroyed, among other things.²³

Time Factor

Russian forces used drones to reconnoiter Ukrainian deployments. This presented the Ukrainians with the challenge of deploying their forces in open terrain without immediately becoming the target of shelling. The flat terrain left little opportunity for cover. Video footage show the Russian

22 Reisner, Alles auf eine Karte – Die ukrainischen Offensiven in Charkiv und Cherson, 12 September 2022.

23 Reisner, Markus: Schweren Waffen für die Ukraine, Truppendienst – Magazin des Österreichischen Bundesheeres, 17 August 2022; Reisner, Markus: Schweren Waffen für die Ukraine: Heavy Metal & Rock 'n Roll, Österreichs Bundesheer, 17 June 2022.

side using artillery to repeatedly target the few hedge strips where the Ukrainian side had taken cover. There are also photos from the beginning of the offensive showing the advancing Ukrainian formations in the open terrain and the impact of shells from the Russian artillery. It was not until the beginning of October 2022 that the situation improved for the advancing Ukrainian troops. After appropriate reconnaissance, they succeeded in identifying thinned-out areas in the Russian front line and breaking through them. The Russian troops were forced to retreat to prepared positions and bases in the depth (line Ishchenka-Dudchany).²⁴

Factor Information

The offensive began on August 29, 2022, in three places. On the one hand, with binding attacks in the southwest and in the northeast, respectively, as well as with the attempt of a central advance including a bridge or river crossing in the center. There, the intention was to form two cauldrons after destroying the bridges in the preparatory phase. Due to the high level of awareness of the Russian troops, it was possible for them to quickly wear down the Ukrainian attack peaks with counterattacks, artillery, and the use of combat helicopters. That is why there has probably been no significant advance by the Ukrainian side so far. However, the advance in the central area of the Russian bridgehead as well as in the northeast is noteworthy. The problem with the further development of the offensive is primarily the ongoing reconnaissance by the Russian side. The latter has also been digging in for months, especially in depth in prepared positions. Since October 2022, the Ukrainian side has been trying to force a resolution through massive artillery deployment. A clear indicator of this is the heavyweight use of HIMARS rocket launchers supplied from the USA with M30A1 projectiles (with area fragmentation effect against troop concentrations and defensive positions).²⁵

24 Reisner, Alles auf eine Karte – Die ukrainischen Offensiven in Charkiv und Cherson, 12 September 2022.

25 Ibid.

5.2 Offensive in Kharkiv

The Ukrainian offensive in the Kharkiv area began on September 6, 2022, and here a resounding measurable success was indeed achieved.²⁶

Factor Terrain

In the space of the second offensive, the Russian forces tried to attack further to the west after the success of the cauldron Battle of Lysychansk. For this purpose, another corps, the 3rd Army Corps, was formed. The assumed intention of the Russians was to advance from the Izyum area to the south and thus to decide the situation in the Donbas for themselves with one blow. Already since July, there had been repeated indications that Ukrainian forces would deploy in the Kharkiv area to prevent this Russian plan. In fact, under the utmost secrecy, the Ukrainians managed to deploy forces there. The plan was to push further east to the Oskil River. This would enable the Ukrainians to take possession of this area and encircle the Russian forces at Izyum.²⁷

Factor Force

Western military equipment was also decisive for the success in this second offensive. On the one hand, T-72 tanks from Poland and the Czech Republic played a major role again, but so did M113 infantry fighting vehicles. In addition, multiple rocket launchers of the MLRS type (multiple rocket launcher systems on tracks) were also used. The self-propelled howitzer 2000, which is capable of firing “Excalibur” type ammunition, was also used. Highly mobile units, some mounted on *pickups* or armored vehicles (e.g. “Bushmaster”), were also vital. That the morale of Ukrainian soldiers in this assault grouping is very high is demonstrated by a video taken just before the fighting began. It shows Ukrainian soldiers gathering once again and singing their national anthem. The use of special weapons systems also contributed to the success of this offensive. One example is the aforementioned “Excalibur” end-phase controlled artillery ammunition, which has

26 Ibid.

27 Reisner, Alles auf eine Karte – Die ukrainischen Offensiven in Charkiv und Cherson, 12 September 2022.

high targeting accuracy. Another effective weapon system is the AGM-88 anti-radar missile from the USA. With this, Ukraine succeeded in destroying targeted Russian anti-aircraft systems and enforcing its own advance and the use of its own air force – albeit on a small scale.²⁸

Time Factor

The offensive began on September 6, 2022, and gained a foothold in a favorable location where more subordinate Russian units were engaged. A mixed battle group, driving ahead with tanks, was able to make a central breakthrough. This advance developed rapidly and continued centrally to the east. Finally, it was possible to bridge a distance of more than fifty kilometers in a short time. Thanks to this breakthrough, highly mobile Ukrainian units were able to quickly take possession of localities, raise the Ukrainian flag and share pictures of it on social networks. This gave Russian soldiers the impression that they were being increasingly surrounded and encircled. The result was eventually a flight of Russian forces eastward. Again, as military history shows, it was impossible to stop a large army formation that had once begun to break away in flight. The Russians did the only thing that was still possible at this point: they tried to set up a defensive position at the Oskil River and to pick up the returning units there. How precarious the situation was can be seen in several videos, which are supposed to show how Russian soldiers with heavy helicopters of the MI-26 type landed tanks and reinforced this line until late at night. In the end, the Russian troops left behind a lot of heavy equipment (one assumes the equipment of three tank regiments), because they had rushed off only with the light vehicles in the direction of the east, in the direction of the south or in the direction of Izyum.²⁹

Factor Information

The Ukrainian attack was carried out in the core by two mechanized brigades, an air assault brigade, territorial units, and additional elements in support. The Ukrainian forces advanced rapidly and managed to push

28 Ibid.

29 Reisner, Alles auf eine Karte – Die ukrainischen Offensiven in Charkiv und Cherson, 12 September 2022.

the attack further east. This was possible primarily because of an existing detailed situational awareness. A result of close coordination between the U.S. and Ukraine and the result of the “in time” transfer of intelligence data. Ukrainian formations targeted their attacks in the identified gaps. The problem from the Russian point of view, on the other hand, was that they failed to break this attack momentum and were therefore overwhelmed by events.³⁰

6 Historical Comparisons

In analyzing this offensive, one can draw historical comparisons. One example would be Operation *Cobra* in July 1944: the breakthrough of Allied forces from the Normandy bridgehead into the depths of the French lowlands. In this operation, the deployment of two armored divisions succeeded in pushing rapidly into the depths and setting the stage for the encirclement of Falaise. The German forces only managed to escape from this cauldron in flight, leaving behind a large number of weapons, equipment, and devices. The situation can also be compared with Operation *Bagration* in June 1944. There, a massive attack succeeded not only in driving the Russian side forward, but above all in driving the German side into an escape movement that could not be stopped permanently until almost the border of the German Reich. This event is also theoretically possible in Ukraine. However, it is also possible that the success will be short-lived, comparable to the German Ardennes offensive in December 1944, in which case the advance succeeded, but due to the superiority of the enemy, they were forced to abandon the gained ground again. It is possible, however, that the successes of the Ukrainian forces will lead to upheavals in Russia similar to those that occurred in October 1917. At the moment, there are no indicators of this, but it could well be that there will be signs of disintegration after further heavy defeats.³¹

30 Reisner, Die ukrainischen Offensiven in Cherson und Charkiv, 5 October 2022.

31 Reisner, Markus: “Ukrainisches Fegefeuer” – Der Krieg um die Ukraine, eine Kurzzusammenfassung nach 250 Tagen, Österreichisches Bundesheer, 1 November 2022.

7 Summary and Outlook

During the Russian advance in February 2022, the limitations of the BTG structure quickly became apparent. Above all, the lack of massive infantry and the decentralized command structure, which predominated at the operational level, had a detrimental effect. It became apparent that the initial Russian force estimate of 200,000 soldiers, which was increasingly consumed, was already too low from the outset. The start of the Russian offensive in the Donbas also shows that Russian forces are still convinced, however, that they can achieve a decision in their favor on the battlefield. The shift to slow and traditional Russian combat techniques and tactics shows the signature of experienced commanders, and decisions are made not only for political but also for operational-tactical reasons. This also shows that Russian forces are capable of adapting to the tactics of Ukrainian forces. However, Russian forces have already suffered heavy losses and are challenged on three fronts (Donbas, Kharkiv, Kherson). Still possible success for the Russian side will depend on its ability to continuously supply its own forces and reserves and, in turn, cut off Ukrainian supplies in depth. For Ukrainian forces, on the other hand, there has been the ongoing challenge of attrition warfare since February 24, 2022. A major Ukrainian offensive appears possible only in the medium term, assuming massive Western military assistance. The West's goal in the medium term will be to deplete Russian reserves.³²

Russia continues to control Crimea and Luhansk oblast, as well as a high proportion of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia. Russian troops are also still managing to advance slowly in Donetsk. Here, just over fifty percent are occupied. Decisive advances have been made near Kharkiv and Kherson. This means the Russian-occupied terrain continues to diminish, to at least below twenty percent. After the successful execution of these Ukrainian offensives, the conflict now enters a new phase. The first phase was the attack and repulse of Russian forces in the Kyiv area. The second phase was the passing of the initiative of action to Russia and the attacks in the Donbas with the encirclement battle of Lysychansk. The third phase is characterized by the passing of the initiative to the Ukrainian side through the offensives near Kherson and Kharkiv, respectively. At present, it can be seen that the success of Kharkiv will be exploited by further Ukrainian

32 Reisner, Markus: Der Kampf um unsere Meinung, Österreichs Bundesheer, 14 September 2022.

attacks in the Lyman area or across the Oskil River. Here, too, an encirclement may succeed. Southeast of Lyman, however, the Russians continue to advance slowly to the west. The goal is the complete capture of the Donetsk oblast.³³

The tactical-operational successes in the Kharkiv and Kherson areas have shown that Ukrainian forces are capable of conducting an offensive and breaking the “Russian steamroller” after a buildup of forces and appropriate secrecy. The offensives also show that Western arms supplies can have a decisive impact on the battlefield. It now depends largely on whether the Ukrainian forces can build on this success. The outcome will be seen in the coming weeks and months. It will also depend on the impact of Russian mobilization and ongoing strategic attrition (ballistic missile, cruise missile, and drone attacks). Only in the spring 2023, therefore, it will be clear whether a turning point has indeed been reached in this war.³⁴

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