

# The people's war in Ukraine

by Ilmari Kähkö

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TITEL:

Volunteer Battalions: Story of a Heroic Deed of Battalions That Saved Ukraine

FÖRFATTARE:

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FOLLOWING THE MAIDAN revolution in February 2014, Ukraine was in disarray. With hollowed out security forces geared more towards internal than external threats, the barely established interim government looked powerlessly as Crimea was occupied by the so-called little green men, or unmarked Russian soldiers. Following a fast and questionable referendum, the peninsula was rapidly annexed by Russia. This inspired a similar "Russian spring" in eastern Ukraine, which further threatened the sovereignty of Ukrainian territory.

The situation was dire. As the Interim President Oleksandr Turchynov admitted, "our country had neither the government system, nor the defence system back then" (p. 30). Ukraine – Europe's second largest country with a population of 45 million – had a combat-ready force of mere 5,000 soldiers. As the instigator of the book under review, the Minister of Internal Affairs Arsen Avakov noted, "the internal military troops and police were demoralized. There were only a couple of units actually capable of resisting the separatists. Something innovative and efficient had to be done" (pp 3-4).

*Volunteer battalions* offers an attempt at an official history of the forces which, as the subtitle of the book makes clear, saved Ukraine against all odds in 2014. These "patriotic" volunteers served an important role in the war that escalated during the spring to encompass increasing violence and Russian assistance. In August, the forces of the Ukrainian Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) were defeated in a counter-offensive of Russian regular units near Ilovaisk, which claimed the lives of around 400 Ukrainian soldiers (p. 155). This forced the government to sue for a unilateral ceasefire, and to submit to the first Minsk ceasefire agreement in September. With almost immediate violations, hostilities flared up in full in January 2015. The defeat of government forces in Debaltseve led to the second Minsk agreement in February. Subsequently, the war has increasingly become reminiscent of the First World War, with troops in fixed defensive positions, covering from enemy artillery and sniper fire. To date the war has resulted in over 10,000 deaths, and forced over two million to leave their homes.

The book under review contains ten chapters, which focus on different theatres of the

war until the events of Ilovaisk. Chronological chapters on Maidan self-defence, Crimean annexation and discussion of separatism in the southeast offer some necessary context. Compiled in the style that became popular after glasnost as previously suppressed stories became publishable, every chapter contains a number of interviews of an eclectic cast of characters, ranging from a journalist to Avakov to other top security and political elites. It is usually these voices of participants, rather than the pithy comments from the authors, which carry on the story. Translated from an almost twice as long Ukrainian edition published a year earlier that covered events up until Debaltseve, this work would have benefited from better editing and structure. Occasionally translations are clumsy, with numerous but generally harmless typos. The choice of chapters from the original version is also odd. For instance, one would assume that international audiences would be interested about foreign fighters in the ATO, a topic of one whole chapter in the original work.

The main problem with the book is that the reader is provided little information regarding the interviews. For instance, the lack of indication when these were made raises questions about the accuracy of accounts: Were they recorded immediately after the events, or three years later? The absence of any kind of discussion regarding the selection of interviewees in turn supports the notion that the work is an official account that celebrates the role Avakov played in the formation of these units. I acquired my own copy of the original Ukrainian version from a disgruntled volunteer who received it in an official ceremony from the minister himself. Wanting nothing to do with him or his book, the volunteer donated it to me. As these kinds of critical voices have not made their way to the volume, it comes with a clear bias. Then again, this is perhaps to be

expected in an official history, which does not attempt to critically discuss the root causes of the war. The celebratory tone is also clear in the focus of the book: it only discusses the volunteer formations under Avakov's ministry, thus excluding those under the Ministry of Defence (MoD).

Despite these issues, the work is a remarkable addition to the almost non-existing English literature on the volunteers. Especially the early pages of *Volunteer battalions* contain previously unknown details about the dynamics that led to the mobilization of these units. As a whole, the story of the book paints an interesting and troubling image of modern war in Europe, which is the focus of the rest of this review, after a short description of the volunteer battalions themselves.

Witnessing a state-in-breaking, thousands of "patriots" took upon themselves the maintaining of Ukraine's territorial integrity. In this manner, the volunteers highlight the relationship and tension between the state, nations and war. A developed idea of nationalism not only existed without much state interference, but also mobilized those willing to fight for state borders. That this was done *despite* the state that often rather hindered than helped needs to be emphasized. For instance, numerous volunteers were unable or unwilling to enlist through the army enlistment offices. Even after the revolution, the state clearly lacked legitimacy in the eyes of the more critical volunteers, many of whom had fought against internal security forces during the Euromaidan protests. Outdated formal, often Soviet-era practices and laws stopped others from enlisting. One of the many volunteers turned down by draft board noted that "draft doctors are the best businessmen." They could make money from both those who want to join, as well as those who do not. Combined with state weakness, many of those who wanted to fight for Ukraine had hence no other option than

to join the battalions. While volunteers were plenty, it was more difficult to find the means to fight the separatists. With the state unable to provide arms before the battalions were legalized and integrated into the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MoIA) special police battalions and MoD territorial defence battalions, the volunteers largely relied on civil society support from individuals in Ukraine and abroad. It is not an exaggeration to say that a nation joined together to fight for Ukraine. Some did this with arms, others with financial, material and moral support.

As even *Volunteer battalions* suggest early on, there is little reason to romanticize the volunteers, some of whom were accused of crimes committed during the war. Neither was the phenomenon unique, as the closest comparable case comes from the armed groups formed during the Yugoslav Wars in 1990s and early 2000s, not to speak of paramilitary forces before and partisans during the Second World War or militias in many contemporary conflicts outside Europe. The fact that this mobilization took place in contemporary Europe in a war that defies many assumptions of what war is supposed to be only makes the case more relevant for study.

Occasionally described as a "hybrid war" in the book, the separatism in eastern Ukraine was clearly something that arose in the shadow of state weakness. In the aftermath of the Crimean annexation, the government was largely considered powerless to react against the separatist claims that surfaced not only in Donetsk and Luhansk, but even in Kharkiv – Ukraine's second-largest city – and Mariupol. Escalation of violence by both sides resulted in not only a war among the people (a concept promoted by Sir Rupert Smith a decade ago), but equally if not more importantly a war *between* people.

While people's war is typically connected to leftist rebels, there is no better way to describe the first phase of war in Ukraine.

After all, Ukraine witnessed mobilization of peoples on opposing sides who held contrasting political ideas, respectively supported by the Kyiv government and Moscow. In this situation characterized by weak political will and lacking state capacity, the volunteers were motivated, enjoyed legitimacy that far surpassed the discredit state security services and mostly politically reliable. This highlights an important aspect of the war evident in all ideas of people's war, namely its inherently political nature. This politicization contributed even to the fragmentation of state authority. The various chapters in *Volunteer battalions* clearly illustrate how local law officials in the east were considered neutral at best or fifth columnists at worst.

Not unlike in recent counterinsurgency literature, even in Ukraine the subversive ideology of separatism was considered a disease that would spread among the generally apolitical population if left unchecked. In Kharkiv "pro-Ukrainian activists would not allow anyone to walk along the streets... with Russian tricolor flags, or to hold 'rallies' supporting the enemy" (p. 73). Further east unarmed people supporting separatists acted as human shields for armed separatists, and for instance helped to stop and disarm Ukrainian security forces sent to uphold order. Facing a recap of Crimean "little green men" in the east, the volunteer battalions became the antidote, or "little black men". The escalating violence later cowed civilians into passivity, but even to taking to arms; they may not have been interested in war, but the war was interested in them.

The political nature of the war is also crucial to understanding questions related to strategy and creation, control and use of force by the Ukrainian forces. Considering the relatively limited casualties incurred, much of the fighting these units conducted was clearly small-scale. For instance, the Dnipro-1 battalion was nearly 900 strong in

Ilovaisk, where it lost 17 killed. During the entire war, the battalion losses amounted to 30 dead and 1 missing (p. 154). Rather, the units organized as special police battalions often carried "sweep-and-clear" and "counter sabotage" operations. This meant that they were maintaining order and looking for separatists, including specific individuals, in liberated areas. According to the head of the Security Service of Ukraine, 2,500 "terrorists and separatists" were "seized and arrested" (p. 13). Most were exchanged for people held by the separatists (who admitted to applying Soviet laws to execute looters, raising the question what they did with those with opposing political loyalties). While all Western military forces are well versed with the Clausewitzian notion of war as a continuation of politics with other means, one would do well to consider the Ukrainian example of what this can amount to in practice.

The volunteers acted as a critical stopgap measure that bought time for the Ukrainian state to "set the wheels of the rusty mechanism of the Ukraine's Armed Forces... in motion" (p. 8). Yet while the early months of the war were characterized by chaos, decision-makers faced pressure because "everything had to and was done within the law... the world was watching us, and we had to prove that Ukraine wasn't Somalia [sic]" (p. 18). Reminding of the importance of political context in all war, the new Ukrainian government had to maintain its international image against the constant barrage of Russian propaganda. This necessitated bringing the volunteers into a legal framework by integrating them to the official force structure. Yet as an account by Avakov proves, the government was caught between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, it had to prevent any unnecessary escalation of violence that could be exploited by Russia (which necessitated controlling the volunteer bat-

talions in the first place). Yet on the other hand, the government had criminalized the separatists as terrorists: "if faced with armed resistance of Russian saboteurs, we had to liquidate the threat as negotiations with the terrorists were impossible and unacceptable" (p. 65). This effectively meant that violence remained the only available means in a war that because of its internationalized and political nature could hardly be won through violence alone. This became apparent after the government lost its gamble with the summer offensive, which as noted was countered by Russian regular troops. Following defeat, the government never recovered initiative. The subsequent events, including the second major defeat in Debaltseve, are not covered in this English language edition.

Yet in many ways, it is a miracle that Ukraine survived in the first place, a feat that the work under review clearly attributes to the volunteer battalions. A similar kind of will to defend portrayed by these Ukrainian men and women underlies all conscript systems, including the newly reinstated one in Sweden. The Ukrainian example illustrates how these forces were crucial in early days of the war and in the execution of some tasks. Yet there were few that believed that they could replace a professional, well-equipped force – which, as noted, did not exist in early 2014. Nevertheless, the Ukrainian volunteer battalions say much about contemporary warfare in a not-too-distant area and from the perspective of national defence against the most likely foe. We would do well to learn from these lessons paid in blood. This official history is an excellent place to start.

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