



A member of a Ukrainian special police unit falls after firing a D-30 howitzer toward Russian positions near Kreminna, Ukraine, on 7 July 2023. (Photo by Libkos via Associated Press)

“Will to Fight”

Twenty-First-Century Insights from the Russo-Ukrainian War

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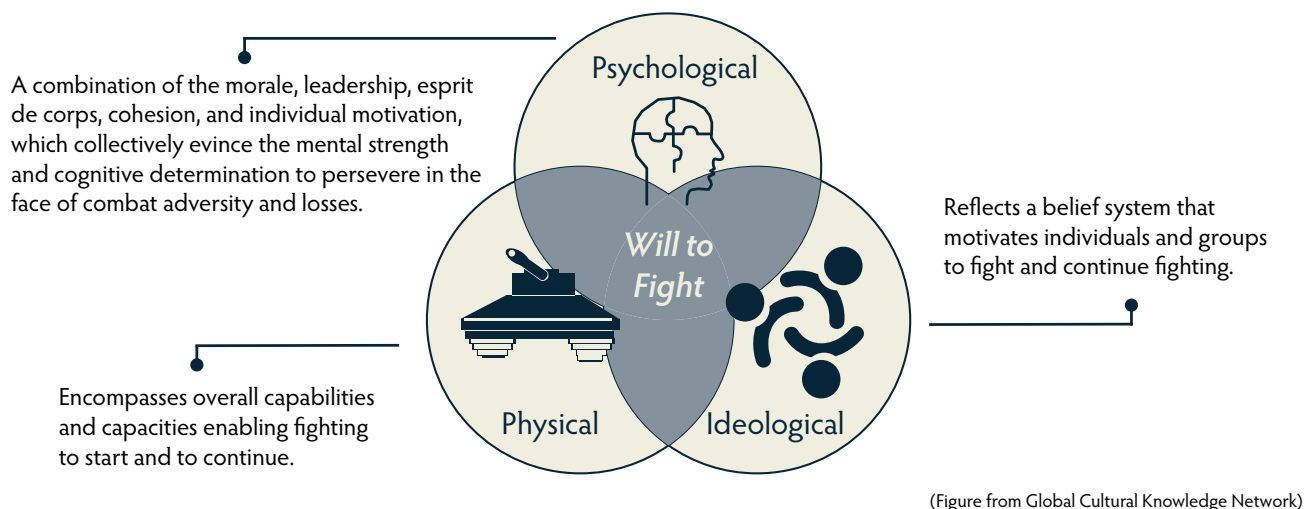


Figure 1. Analytic Elements of Will to Fight

We are waging a war against the country whose size is 28 times larger than ours, whose population is 4 times larger than ours, and whose military capabilities are many times greater than ours. We are waging a war by land, air, sea, cyberspace, etc. We have been at war not for 8 months, but for 8 years and 8 months. All this testifies to our resilience, courage to defend our own, and the will to win. Would other countries withstand such pressure? ... I don't know about others, but we are holding on, regrouping, building up reserves, strengthening the defence, and gradually liberating our homeland. The victory is given to us very hard. But it will definitely be secured.

—Valerii Zoluzhnyi, Former Commander in Chief, Armed Forces of Ukraine, 31 October 2022

The 2022 Russo-Ukrainian War is a complex and enduring confrontation that warrants a nuanced exploration of the forces driving the determination, capacity, and narrative of the warring parties. These forces coalesce to produce a “will to fight,” an often underestimated component in the annals of warfare and strategic defense. It develops at the individual level, extends to the national level, and is necessary to win.¹

At its core, the will to fight in this conflict can be understood as a composite of psychological resilience, physical capability and capacity, and ideological conviction (see figure 1). These dimensions continually evolve or change because of the interplay between

unique opposing forces. Each of these dimensions plays a pivotal role in shaping the dynamics of the conflict, influencing both the strategies employed and the tenacity displayed by the involved nations.

The historical significance of a resolute will to fight is vividly illustrated by the United States’ strategic evolution during World War II. Upon entering the conflict, the United States lacked a clear vision of victory. A crucial shift occurred in 1942 when U.S. leadership, considering military strengths, the global strategic context, and a moral imperative to overcome fascism, committed to the ambitious goal of the complete and unconditional surrender of the Axis powers. This resolve was publicly affirmed at the 1943 Casablanca Conference, where President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill announced there would be no peace negotiations, only the pursuit of unconditional surrender. This stance, reinforcing the national will to fight alongside superior military resources, was instrumental in securing victory.² Conversely, the conflicts in Vietnam and Iraq highlight the critical role of assessing the will to fight within both allies and adversaries. In Vietnam, the United States encountered tenacious resistance from the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong, who were deeply committed to defending their country and opposing foreign forces. This determination significantly contributed to the protraction of the conflict, despite the United States’ superior military resources.³ Similarly, in Iraq, the resilience and dedication to the cause of insurgent groups, combined

with unclear strategic goals by the United States and its allies, led to extended engagements and mixed results.⁴

These cases emphasize the complexity of military engagements, where the psychological and ideological components of warfare are as crucial as the physical aspects. They underscore the crucial role of the will to fight alongside military capabilities in determining conflict outcomes. This concept, embodying determination, resilience, and resolve, often decisively influences engagement results beyond mere military strength.⁵ Recognizing the multifaceted nature of the will to fight—spanning psychological, physical, and ideological aspects—is essential for leaders, policymakers, planners, and scholars. The subsequent analysis of these dimensions within the Russo-Ukrainian War context aims to dissect the complex interplay of factors driving this protracted conflict, illustrating how these elements of resolve, which are not static, evolve over time and dynamically interact to impact the ongoing military engagements. Understanding these dynamics is vital for comprehending the motivations and actions of involved parties, highlighting the significance of the will to fight in shaping conflict trajectories.

Psychological Will to Fight

The psychological will to fight or the determination to persist in combat plays a crucial role in maintaining

resolve beyond the limits of territorial divisions. It encompasses a range of interactive factors, including morale, leadership, cohesion, and motivation, which collectively drive militaries and civilians to persevere amid adversity.

In any conflict, the strength of a nation's resolve is often propelled by psychological factors. Morale, the sense of purpose, and individual determination play critical roles in enabling forces to transcend physical limitations. Leadership and cohesion further enhance the mental fortitude and cognitive determination of soldiers and civilians, fostering resilience in the face of combat adversity. For example, facing difficult odds at the Battle of Stalingrad, Soviet soldiers displayed unyielding determination, fortified by leaders like Gen. Georgy Zhukov, which increased their resilience and eventually shifted the battle in their favor.⁶

Various internal and external factors continually influence the psychological will to fight. Understanding this dimension provides essential insights into the dynamics that determine the endurance and success of military engagements, making it a pivotal aspect of resolve and occasionally the tipping point in any conflict.

Russia's psychological will to fight.

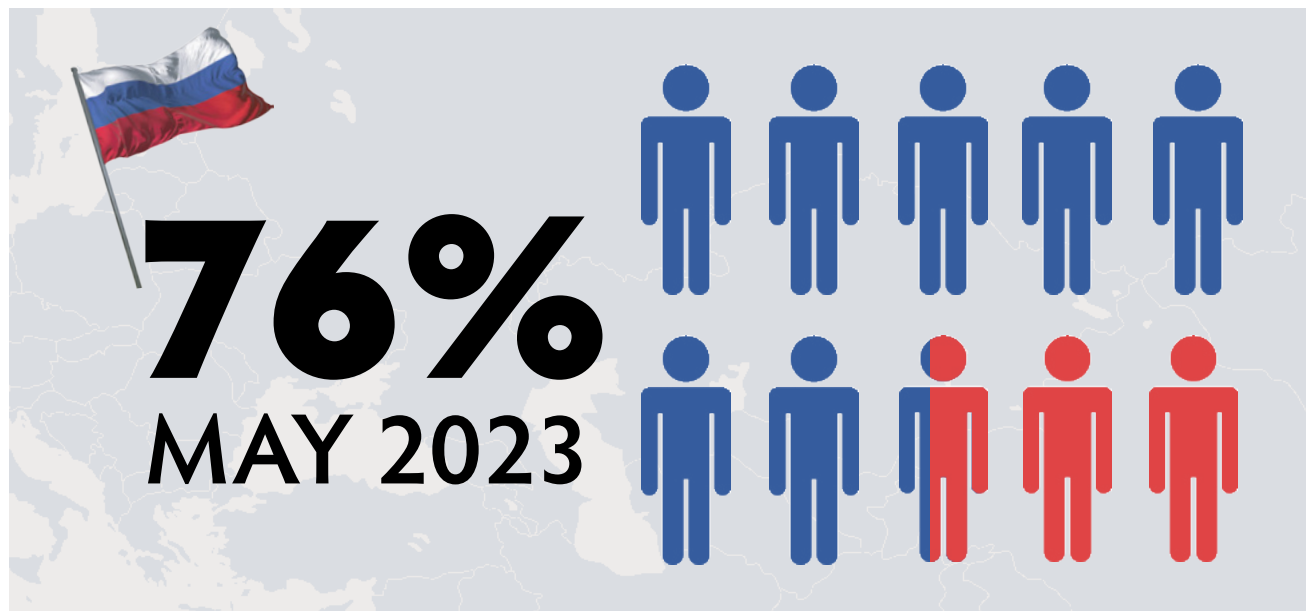
Understanding the psychological dimension of Russia's will to fight in the ongoing conflict is crucial for comprehending the dynamics of the war.

Initially, Moscow framed the war as a "special military operation" (SMO) to propagate Kremlin narratives of denazification and demilitarization, downplay the risks to Russian forces and Ukrainian society, and bolster confidence in Russian military superiority. However, battlefield realities shattered these expectations. Russian troops faced significant casualties and equipment losses, particularly among elite units like *Spetsnaz* (special operations) and airborne troops. Some

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(Figure from the ANO Levada Center)

Figure 2. Percentage of Russians Who Support the So-Called “Special Military Operation” in Ukraine

soldiers were misled; believing they were deploying for exercises, they found themselves in combat in Ukraine. Additionally, SMO objectives such as the demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine were revealed as Kremlin disinformation. These factors likely contributed to a diminishing psychological will to fight among Russian troops.

Moreover, Russia’s informational asymmetry (overestimating its strength and underestimating Ukrainian capabilities) created a significant expectancy violation (see breakout box on page 39).⁷ The Kremlin’s narratives of military power, backed by visible displays of forces and equipment, initially boosted confidence but were challenged by the realities of combat in Ukraine.⁸ Over time, many Russians began questioning the war’s rationale and their belief in Russian military prowess.⁹ Information discrepancies between the official narratives and soldiers’ experiences on the battlefield further eroded the will to fight, leading to a desire to surrender or escape combat.¹⁰

The Kremlin’s efforts to mobilize citizen support by framing the conflict as defending the motherland against an “evil” foreign threat faced challenges in maintaining control over the information space.¹¹ Reports of Russian “barrier troops” to stop unauthorized withdrawals underscored command anxiety over

the will to fight.¹² While domestic Russian support has eroded gradually from its high in the mid-80 percent of people polled, a majority still backs the war (see figure 2).¹³ However, growing awareness of the war’s realities has dampened public confidence, increased disenchantment, and caused troops’ will to fight to decline.¹⁴ Despite ongoing efforts by President Vladimir Putin, heavy-casualty-producing attacks continue to impact troop morale, hindering their effectiveness.¹⁵

Ukraine’s psychological will to fight. The psychological dimension of Ukraine’s will to fight in the ongoing conflict showcases a remarkable resilience and determination among Ukrainian forces and civilians. The war, which began with Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the conflict in the Donbas region, profoundly influenced Ukrainian national identity and resolve. Ukrainians confronted Russian aggression and aspirations to reestablish regional dominance, galvanizing a collective war mentality against an existential threat to Ukrainian statehood.¹⁶

Numerous polls indicate that nearly all Ukrainians believe in victory over Russia. This support is particularly robust in regions farther from the front lines, the west and center, and slightly weaker in areas closer to the conflict in the south and east. Opposition to Russian aggression existed long before the 2022



As Russia's military operation in Ukraine continues, Russian radiation, chemical, and biological defense troops of the Southern Military District watch an online broadcast of President Vladimir Putin's annual address to the Federal Assembly on a laptop at an unknown location. (Photo by RIA Novosti/Sputnik via Associated Press)

invasion, as a majority consistently demanded the liberation of all Russia-occupied territories.¹⁷

However, it is essential to acknowledge that the initial enthusiasm for volunteering to fight Russia has waned as the war has entered its third year with escalating casualties and no clear end in sight. This shift led the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF) to depend more on conscription and to relax certain nonqualifying conditions for enlistment.¹⁸ While these changes reflect the evolving nature of the conflict, they do not diminish the overall psychological will to fight.

Physical Will to Fight

The physical will to fight is critical to a country's determination to persist during conflict, transcending national boundaries. It encompasses the capability and capacity to initiate and sustain engagements underpinned by factors such as training, leadership, equipment, personnel, and logistics. In any armed confrontation, effectively employing military resources is a crucial and decisive component for victory.

Capability includes training and leadership, while capacity includes personnel and materiel. Both are pivotal in shaping the physical will to fight by enhancing combat effectiveness, bolstering resources, and increasing the resolve of military personnel. Militaries are capable when resourced with a proper level of competence to compete. Additionally, adequate personnel, equipment, logistics, and support contribute to a nation's physical capacity to engage in protracted conflicts. The Battle of Thermopylae in 480 BC exemplifies this, wherein a vastly outnumbered Spartan army led by King Leonidas demonstrated exceptional physical resilience and combat acumen against a vastly superior Persian foe.¹⁹ Yet, as shown by the Islamic State's triumph over a better-resourced Iraqi Army in 2015, physical capacity—in isolation—will not ensure victory.²⁰

Thus, understanding the physical will to fight offers invaluable insights into a nation's ability to persevere in the face of adversity. It underscores the intricate dynamics that determine the success or failure of military

GLOBAL FIREPOWER INDEX MILITARY STRENGTH RANKING		2021	2022	2023
	Russian Federation	2 nd	2 nd	2 nd
	Ukraine	25 th	22 nd	15 th

(Figure from Global Firepower)

Figure 3. Global Firepower Military Strength Ranking of Russia and Ukraine, 2021–2023

endeavors, making it an essential dimension of resolve in any conflict scenario.

Russia's physical will to fight. Russia's excessive confidence in its military superiority in terms of forces, firepower, and information control, relative to its smaller but well-led, trained, and motivated Ukrainian adversary, led to the failure of its initial objectives and necessitated a reassessment of strategy and tactics. The SMO exposed significant deficiencies in Russian military capabilities spanning tactics, training, logistics, and leadership. These shortcomings resulted in substantial casualties and equipment losses, ultimately eroding the Russian military's will to fight.

Since the February 2022 invasion, Russian forces have consistently underperformed against their Ukrainian counterparts despite having superior resources and firepower (see figure 3).²¹ Russia's military had engaged in a decade-long modernization program, allocating a substantial portion of its military budget to arms procurement and a significant share of its GDP to defense.²² However, persistent deficiencies, including inadequate war planning, resourcing, and execution, have resulted in battlefield failures.²³ Russia reverted to Soviet-style tactics after its initial failure to rapidly force Kyiv's capitulation through environment

Russian versus Ukrainian Military Strength

Prior to the February 2022 invasion, the Ukrainian Armed Forces were significantly weaker in terms of materiel and troop strength than Russia. Since the invasion, Ukraine has steadily moved up in the Global Firepower Index Military Strength Ranking, while Russia's position has remained firm. Ukraine underwent a military modernization program after Russia's seizure of Crimea and the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine in 2014–2015. By January 2023, Ukraine improved its global ranking by ten spots because of its whole-of-nation response to Russia's invasion and the corresponding massive military and economic support from the West. Russia held steady in the rankings because of its massive manpower and materiel resources, even despite its limitations related to preparedness, leadership, training, and supply issues.

Source: "2023 Russia Military Strength," Global Firepower, 19 January 2023, https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.php?country_id=russia.

Russian Command and Control versus Mission Command

Russia does not employ the U.S. concept of “mission command” in its version of the military decision-making process (MDMP) and has no equivalent to “commander’s intent.” In practice, the Russian system of decision-making requires a somewhat rigid system of tactics. Russian tactics at battalion level and below can best be described as battle drills that are standardized for ground forces, naval infantry, and airborne units. According to U.S. and Western officers who have interacted with their Russian counterparts, there appear to be several main distinctions in the Russian approach to MDMP. First, Russian military leaders appear to use a shortened and largely informal MDMP. Second, Russian commanders intentionally wait until the last possible moment before making decisions, when they are confident they have gathered as much information as needed. Third, the Russian system is designed to support a highly capable commander and relatively small staff. Thus, Russian MDMP is much more commander-centric than in Western militaries, and the personality of an individual commander plays a major role.

Source: Roger N. McDermott and Charles K. Bartles, *The Russian Military Decision-Making Process & Automated Command and Control* (Hamburg, DE: German Institute for Defence and Strategic Studies, 29 October 2020), <https://gids-hamburg.de/the-russian-military-decision-making-process-automated-command-and-control/#>.

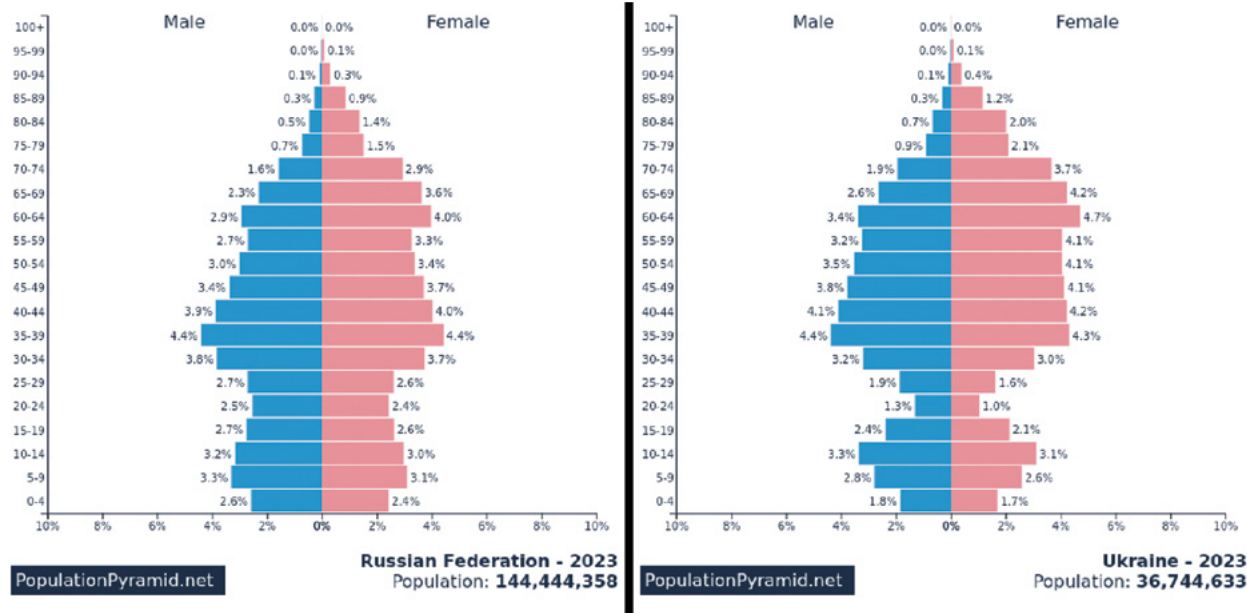
preparation followed by swift military actions.²⁴ Russian tactics have since shifted toward identifying weak points in Ukrainian lines and exploiting them, with some success. However, Russian reliance on brute-force tactics combined with the determined resistance of Ukrainian forces, lack of initiative by low-level leadership, and insufficient training contributed to significant Russian casualties and equipment losses. Additionally, the combination of poor logistics and limited medical support has kept the Russian military’s will to fight in a weakened state, predominantly bolstered by military leadership from the top-down rather than at the troop level.²⁵

The absorption of substantial personnel and equipment losses, even among elite units like Spetznaz and airborne troops, sends the message that the Russian command is willing to accept these costs, potentially undermining the will to fight among both troops and the broader public.²⁶ A recent reorganization of Russian infantry forces aimed at conserving more elite troops has bolstered the will to fight in higher-tier formations but undermined the lower-tier infantry’s resolve, as they perceive themselves as expendable.²⁷ Despite heavy casualties, Russia’s significant population advantage over Ukraine has provided a larger pool of replacements for battlefield losses. However, increasing casualty figures have placed political pressure on Putin and impacted soldier morale.²⁸

Inadequately trained new troops, particularly conscripts and hastily mobilized *mobiki* (Russian reservists), have contributed to the high casualty figures. Both Russian and Ukrainian soldiers have reported that Russian replacements arrive on the battlefield with as little as two weeks of training and often with outdated weapons and equipment. Intercepted communications record Russian soldiers and leaders complaining about ammunition shortages, lack of spare parts, inadequate food, and insufficient battlefield medical support.²⁹ In peacetime, the absence of adequate training, equipment, and support already negatively affects morale, which is further amplified in combat situations, occasionally resulting in Russian troops refusing to fight.³⁰

Ukraine’s physical will to fight. Over the years, the UAF’s transformation has been a remarkable evolution from a Soviet-style, command-heavy force with antiquated equipment into a modern, adaptable Western-style force. While still militarily weaker than Russia in measurable capacity, Ukraine’s commitment to rebuilding its armed forces, with support from the United States and NATO, has significantly boosted its physical will to fight.³¹

Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Ukraine has received substantial foreign support in terms of training, weaponry, and institution building, especially from the United States and other NATO countries.



(Figure from [PopulationPyramid.net](https://populationpyramid.net))

Figure 4. Comparison of the Populations of Russia and Ukraine

This assistance has enabled Ukraine to develop a professional military with enhanced institutional capacity, leadership, and access to modern equipment.³² However, external support before the invasion did not immediately result in battlefield success. Initially, heavy casualties, logistical issues, delays in weapon deliveries, poor communication, and reliance on outdated Soviet-style leadership and tactics by senior leaders dampened morale.³³

Nonetheless, continued support from the West has augmented and improved UAF capacity and capability. Training programs encompassing advanced weapon systems (e.g., Patriot, HIMARS, M-1 Abrams tanks, and Leopard tanks), combined arms tactics, and mission command principles provided Ukrainian soldiers with a diverse skill set for modern warfare.³⁴ Notably, transitioning from a rigid top-down command structure to a more flexible mission command approach has empowered field- and company-grade leaders to show initiative and make quicker decisions on the battlefield.³⁵

Another critical factor contributing to the UAF's success and elevated morale is the development of a competent Ukrainian noncommissioned officer (NCO) corps. This transformation aligns with Western military practices, promoting independence

and initiative among smaller units. The newfound agency of individual Ukrainian soldiers, fostered by NCO-led units employing mission command principles, has notably boosted morale when compared to the rigid, centralized approach favored by the Russian military.³⁶

Nevertheless, Ukraine still faces physical challenges. Heavy casualties continue to attrit its experienced soldiers and leaders. As time passes and casualties rise, addressing troop shortages becomes increasingly difficult as Ukraine's population is a quarter that of Russia's (see figure 4).³⁷ The conflict's protracted nature has led to a shortage of seasoned troops, with replacements often lacking experience and adequate training due to the exigencies of the conflict.³⁸ Estimates reveal staggering figures of casualties, both killed and wounded, underscoring the toll war has taken on Ukraine.³⁹

Supply shortages remain a concern. Despite becoming the third-largest global arms importer in 2022, Ukraine still grapples with Soviet-era equipment, ammunition shortages, and the challenge of integrating modern weaponry effectively.⁴⁰ These factors, when combined with the lack of combat experience among new troops, can impact their will to fight and overall effectiveness.⁴¹

The Russian Orthodox Church

For generations, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has played a significant role in Moscow's ability to project influence domestically and internationally. The Kremlin spends considerable resources using the ROC to promote Moscow's concept of a global "Russian world" comprised not only of ethnic Russians but also Russian speakers, their families, and others whose cultural, familial, or business connections to Russia make them Russia's "compatriots" (*Sootechestvenniki*). Russia is the largest Orthodox majority country, with ninety million church members, and its Moscow Patriarchate oversees the world's largest community of Orthodox Christians: 150 million, which is half of the total number of Orthodox Christians worldwide.

Sources: Robert Kurz, Foreign Military Studies Office, as part of Ukrainian Senior National Defense Personnel Studies Group Consultation conducted in Kyiv, Ukraine, in May 2016 and from within the United States in November 2017; Vera Zakem, Paul Saunders, and Daniel Antoun, *Mobilizing Compatriots: "Russia's Strategy, Tactics, and Influence in the Former Soviet Union"* (Arlington, VA: CNA, November 2015), https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/DOP-2015-U-011689-1Rev.pdf; J. Eugene Clay, "Invasion of Ukraine Has Split 200 Million Orthodox Christians," Greek Reporter, 29 March 2022, <https://greekreporter.com/2022/03/29/ukraine-split-300-million-orthodox-christians/>; Laurence Peter, "Orthodox Church Split: Five Reasons Why It Matters," BBC, 17 October 2018, <https://bbc.com/news/world-europe-45877584>; "Orthodox Church," WorldData.info, accessed 21 March 2024, <https://www.worlddata.info/religions/orthodoxes.php>.

Ideological Will to Fight

The ideological will to fight is a distinct and vital factor in perseverance during conflicts, surpassing the limits imposed by national identity. It is the combatant's science of ideas from a particular political or religious belief system from which narratives are constructed to justify and motivate engagement in armed conflicts.⁴² These narratives often portray combatants as defenders against perceived threats, invoking historical sentiments and reinforcing beliefs that underpin the cause and emanate from social conditions that are vulnerable to protest. In this sense, religious institutions often play a pivotal role in providing ideological justifications for conflicts, framing them as sacred struggles. Thus, whether religious, as seen in some of the Crusades

of the Middle Ages or the Islamic State's pursuit of an Islamic caliphate, or politically driven such as the Russian Revolution or Nazi Fascism, this element can be the primary motivator in conflict.⁴³

However, the extent to which an ideological narrative resonates with the population as a belief system can vary widely, with the depth of religious or political commitment influencing individual and collective resolve. Understanding the ideological will to fight offers valuable insights into the complexities of resolve, shedding light on the delicate interplay between narratives, historical sentiments, and religious influences in the context of armed conflicts.

Russia's ideological will to fight. The ideological dimension of the Russian will to fight is closely intertwined with the narrative of the conflict and



(Figure courtesy of the Ukraine Ministry of Defense)

Figure 5. UAF Video from #FreedomIsOurReligion Social Media Campaign

Russian Influence through the Church

Ukraine has been a direct target of Russian influence through the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). Next to Russia, Ukraine has the largest Orthodox population in the northern hemisphere, with approximately 65 percent of its 27.8 million people identifying as members of the Orthodox Church. Until the 2018 formation and official recognition of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), the majority of the country's Orthodox communities fell under the Moscow Patriarchate, the Kyiv Patriarchate (which split from the former in 1992),¹ and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church.² Until recently, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), under the Moscow Patriarchate, formed the largest Orthodox community in the country and was the most highly integrated with Moscow's politically influenced church leadership. Today, the OCU has grown to significantly erode and eclipse the size and influence of the Moscow Patriarchate in Ukraine, a development that has only gained momentum as the Russia-Ukraine war continues.

1. The Kyiv Patriarchate was not officially recognized by the greater Orthodox community until 2018, when Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew in Istanbul, of the Constantinople Patriarchate—whose overarching position in the Orthodox Church community authorizes him to recognize and endorse Orthodox churches—revoked a seventeenth-century ruling that places Ukraine's Orthodox Church under the Moscow patriarch. The Kyiv Patriarchate then combined nearly all non-Moscow Patriarchate churches in Ukraine into a new "Orthodox Church of Ukraine," which Bartholomew subsequently recognized. For most Ukrainians, this symbolized a final step in their country's independence from Moscow. Valery Kalinosvsky, "Russian Orthodox Church Cuts Ties with Constantinople," MSN, 15 October 2018, <https://www.msn.com/enus/news/world/russianorthodoxchurchcutstieswithconstantinople/arBBQqBy2>; Carlotta Gall, "Ukrainian Orthodox Christians Formally Break from Russia," *New York Times* (website), 6 January 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/19/01/06/world/europe/orthodoxchurchukrainerrussia.html>.

2. "Autocephalous" means that the church has its own head.

Source: Vera Zakem, Paul Saunders, and Daniel Antoun, *Mobilizing Compatriots: "Russia's Strategy, Tactics, and Influence in the Former Soviet Union"* (Arlington, VA: CNA, November 2015), https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/DOP-2015-U-011689-1Rev.pdf.

the role of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). The Kremlin's justification for the SMO portrays Russian soldiers as defenders of their motherland against an evil enemy, framed within the context of preserving Russian identity and Orthodox Christian civilization. This narrative effectively stirs historical Russian hatred of Nazism and reinforces perceptions of the threat to Russian citizens in Ukraine and Russia from the West. The ROC plays a pivotal role in this narrative, providing religious legitimization for the conflict and framing it as a holy struggle akin to the Great Patriotic War (World War II). The narratives from the Kremlin and the ROC likely have bolstered domestic support for the SMO.⁴⁴

Despite the Kremlin's efforts to cultivate ideological support for the war, there exists a significant gap between identification with these narratives and religious practice within Russia, particularly within the Russian military. While the ROC endorses the government's narrative and encourages the faithful to endorse the

"holy" war, the skepticism toward religion within the Russian military remains relevant. This skepticism is rooted in the historical association of the ROC leadership with the Kremlin, which often leads soldiers to view religious promises as hollow and insincere.⁴⁵

Ukraine's ideological will to fight. The Ukrainian will to fight is less ideological than it is psychological. The ideological element is rather small comparatively. Ukrainians are primarily motivated to fight Russian forces for political, social, and rational reasons instead of religious reasons (see figure 5). The Kremlin's attempts to use the ROC to sway Ukrainian sentiment and gather intelligence on the Ukrainian military have yielded an unexpected outcome. It has led to a rejection of the Moscow Patriarchate's control of Orthodox Christianity in Ukraine by the Ukrainian government and a significant portion of the population.

The Kremlin's strategy of advancing the concept of a greater ethnocultural Russian state, *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World), to unite Russians and their

“Expectancy Violation Theory” Explains Russia’s and Ukraine’s Disparate Wills to Fight

The difference in Russian and Ukrainian will to fight can be explained with the concept of expectancy violation. This refers to situations in which an individual’s thoughts or beliefs about a particular event or outcome are not what they expected and are instead violated or challenged. An expectancy violation can be both positive and negative. In the context of military conflicts, expectancy violations can have both positive and negative effects on the psychological will to fight.

Russia. Repeated failures, setbacks, or unmet expectations eroded morale and weakened Russian soldiers’ psychological will to fight. Sustained disappointments led to a loss of confidence, demoralization, and a diminished belief in the likelihood of success. Further, expectancy violation introduced doubt and uncertainty regarding the feasibility of achieving the objectives of the special military operation. As Russia repeatedly encountered unexpected challenges from Ukrainian forces, its strategic plans began to fail, which undermined Russian forces’ confidence and created skepticism about the likelihood of victory, weakening the psychological will to fight.

Ukraine. Ukrainian soldiers experienced an expectancy violation in terms of unexpected success or achievement on the battlefield against Russian forces. Surpassing initial expectations created a sense of empowerment and reinforced their belief that victory is possible. Further, expectancy violation fostered greater cohesion and trust within Ukrainian forces. As soldiers witnessed their comrades’ surpassing expectations or displaying exceptional bravery, it enhanced their belief in the collective strength and capabilities of their units. This shared experience strengthened bonds, boosted morale, and increased their psychological will to fight as a cohesive force.

Source: Judee K. Burgoon and Jerold L. Hale, “Nonverbal Expectancy Violations: Model Elaboration and Application to Immediacy Behaviors,” *Communication Monographs* 55, no. 1 (1988): 58–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637758809376158>.

compatriots has faced staunch resistance in Ukraine.⁴⁶ The Ukrainian Security Service has conducted investigations into pro-Russian Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) entities, accusing them of spreading Russian propaganda and disinformation, potentially collecting intelligence on the Ukrainian military. This scrutiny has led the Ukrainian government to limit UOC influence and bolstered popular anti-Russian sentiment.⁴⁷

In response to Russia’s aggression, Orthodox Ukrainians have distanced themselves from the Moscow Patriarchate, transferring their allegiance to churches not under its authority, including the growing UOC. Markedly, Kyiv’s decision to shift the celebration of Christmas from the traditional Orthodox date of 7 January to 25 December further underscores the resistance to Moscow Patriarchate tradition. This shift represents a direct response by Ukrainians to Russia’s attack on their territory, ethnic identity, and values.⁴⁸

Conclusion

The Russo-Ukrainian War offers a vivid lesson on the dynamics of the will to fight. While material capabilities are crucial in modern warfare, the spirit, resilience, and commitment of a people to defend their homeland, as Ukraine has demonstrated, can profoundly shape the course of a conflict. Policymaking and planning must go beyond mere assessments of Russian and Ukrainian military capacity and capability and incorporate a deeper understanding of the psychological and social factors that drive their will to fight, especially as both nations exhibit significant, albeit diverse, motivations in their desire to prevail.

Russia’s will to fight originates mainly from the top down, influenced by a Kremlin-controlled information milieu and bolstered by its vast resources. Although the Kremlin exploits the Russian Orthodox Church, ideological motivations are not the primary driving force for either side in this war.

Ukraine's will to fight emanates from a profound psychological and nationalistic source, supported by both its military and populace. The existential threat posed by Russia fuels Ukraine's determination, amplified by the reality of defending its homeland. Ukraine holds the psychological upper hand, but it grapples with tangible challenges to its will to fight, particularly in materiel and troop reinforcement, whereas Russia's larger economy and population provide it an advantage. Ukraine's ability to continue to fight hinges on the West's continued materiel support and its dwindling pool of recruitable citizens. The unfolding Russo-Ukrainian War suggests several lessons that can guide U.S. and allied military decision-makers in planning for future large-scale combat operations and other types of conflict:

Underestimating resilience. One of the significant lessons from the conflict is the danger of underestimating a nation's resilience and will to fight based on material assessments. Russia, with its superior military might, faced stiffer resistance than anticipated due to the strong will of the Ukrainian defense forces and citizens.

Moral high ground. A nation or group that believes it holds the moral high ground can demonstrate an outsized will to fight. For many Ukrainians, the defense of their homeland is seen in moralistic terms, which further fuels their resolve.

International solidarity. The will to fight is not just a domestic phenomenon. International support, both moral and material, can bolster the spirit of a nation under threat. Ukraine's ability to garner international sympathy and support plays a role in sustaining its will to fight.

Limitations of soft power. While "soft power" strategies like information warfare, propaganda, and economic pressure are essential in modern conflicts, the Russo-Ukrainian War underscores that these cannot easily erode a determined will to fight.

Implications for the U.S. Army

The psychological element of the will to fight is a tipping point. The psychological will to fight, intrinsically tied to physical capacity, is paramount. When external support is held constant, internal resolve becomes the game-changer. Even for the U.S. Army, material support alone is not sufficient; fostering psychological resilience is an intrinsic and vital factor in achieving objectives during large-scale combat

operations (LSCO). Partnering with allies like Ukraine potentially offers valuable insights for the U.S. Army to bolster its training and morale-building strategies.

Ukraine's staunch resistance, even when out-matched, underscores that facing an existential threat sparks a deep-seated will to fight. The U.S. Army can address such fervent resistance in future exercises and engagements and consider approaches to recalibrate strategies when facing or supporting forces motivated by this variable.

While numerically disadvantaged forces like Ukraine may struggle in a prolonged personnel attrition war, they can potentially succeed in eroding an adversary's resolve. It is important for the U.S. Army to understand the benefits of targeting an opponent's will, especially by factoring in aspects of foreign materiel support and psychological operations, as well as anticipating how adversaries may use similar tactics against them.

The Russo-Ukrainian War reinforces the efficacy of mission command against a more centralized, top-driven command structure in LSCO. Initiative and innovation at all levels of command breed success and contribute to the will to fight. While still learning to take fuller advantage of combined arms tactics, the UAF has effectively employed mission command, especially in its counteroffensives. The U.S. Army can capitalize and generate gains by reinforcing its mission command principles, especially as they might be employed in LSCO.

The conflict illustrates that superior training, leadership, and equipment can counterbalance numerical advantages. By investing strategically in enhancing the quality of its training and equipment, the U.S. Army may benefit from the ability to offset numerical deficits in future LSCO scenarios. Moreover, observing the contrast between the UAF's successes and Russian setbacks, the U.S. Army can further refine its focus on producing well-trained, well-equipped forces, ensuring readiness and adaptability. ■

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Notes

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