



Russia's Battlefield Woes in Ukraine

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THE ISSUE

Russian military forces have failed to effectively advance along multiple axes in Ukraine, seized limited territory, lost substantial quantities of equipment relative to Ukraine, and suffered remarkably high rates of fatalities and casualties since January 2024, according to new CSIS data. While some policymakers and experts argue that Russia holds “all the cards” in the Ukraine war, the data suggests that the Russian military has performed relatively poorly on the battlefield.

There has been a growing chorus of policymakers and analysts who argue that the Russian military holds the initiative in the war in Ukraine and will likely triumph. As one U.S. academic contended, “the United States and the West more generally and Ukraine have lost in the war over Ukraine,” and “the Russians are going to win.”¹ Dmytro Kuleba, a former Ukrainian foreign minister, remarked that unless the current trajectory changes, “we will lose this war.”² In addition, some U.S. policymakers have concluded that Russia has “all the cards.”³

Not surprisingly, Russian President Vladimir Putin has boasted that Russia is decisively winning on the battlefield: “Overall, we can clearly see what is happening right now. Our troops have the strategic initiative along the entire contact line.” He continued that “we have reason to believe that we are set to finish them off. I think that people in Ukraine need to realize what is going on.”⁴ Andrei Kartapolov, head of the defense committee in the Duma, Russia’s lower legislative chamber, followed Putin’s comments with threats that if Ukraine did not accede

to Russia’s maximalist demands in peace negotiations, Ukrainian leaders would be forced to listen to “the language of the Russian bayonet.”⁵

To better understand the state of the war and Russia’s battlefield performance, this analysis asks: How successful has the Russian military been in achieving the Kremlin’s objectives? What factors have contributed to this outcome? To answer these questions, this assessment examines several indicators of Russia’s battlefield performance: the relative rate of advance of Russian forces, the size of Russian territorial gains, the scope of equipment losses, and fatality and overall casualty rates. The evidence suggests that Russia has largely failed to achieve its primary objectives and has suffered high costs.

First, Russian forces have advanced an average of only 50 meters per day in such areas as Kharkiv, slower than during the Somme offensive in World War I, where French and British forces advanced an average of 80 meters per day. Russian rates of advance have also been significantly slower than during such offensives as Galicia in 1914 (1,580 meters per day), Gorizia in 1916 (500 meters), Belleau Wood

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in 1918 (410 meters), Leningrad in 1943 (1,000 meters), and Kursk-Oboyan in 1943 (3,220 meters). Even Russia's rate of advance in parts of Donetsk Oblast, averaging 135 meters per day, has been remarkably slow.

Second, Russia's seizure of approximately 5,000 square kilometers of territory in Ukraine since January 2024 has been paltry—amounting to less than 1 percent of Ukrainian territory—and has occurred mainly in Donetsk, Luhansk, and Kharkiv Oblasts. Russia's marginal gains are particularly noteworthy compared to its conquest of 120,000 square kilometers during the first five weeks of the war and Ukraine's recapture of 50,000 square kilometers in the spring of 2022.

Third, Russia has lost substantial quantities of equipment across the land, air, and sea domains, highlighting the sharp matériel toll of its attrition campaign. Since January 2024, for example, Russia has lost roughly 1,149 armored fighting vehicles, 3,098 infantry fighting vehicles, 300 self-propelled artillery, and 1,865 tanks. Even more noteworthy, Russian equipment losses have been significantly higher than Ukrainian losses, varying between a ratio of 5:1 and 2:1 in Ukraine's favor.

Fourth, Russian fatalities and casualties have been extraordinary. Russia will likely hit the 1 million casualty mark in the summer of 2025—a stunning and grisly milestone. Overall, a high of 250,000 Russian soldiers have died in Ukraine, with over 950,000 total Russian casualties, a sign of Putin's blatant disregard for his soldiers. To put these numbers into historical perspective, Russia has suffered roughly five times as many fatalities in Ukraine as in all Russian and Soviet wars *combined* between the end of World War II and the start of the full-scale invasion in February 2022. In addition, Russian fatalities in Ukraine (in just over three years) are 15 times larger than the Soviet Union's decade-long war in Afghanistan and 10 times larger than Russia's 13 years of war in Chechnya.⁶

Russia's poor performance has likely been caused by several factors: the Russian military's reliance on dismounted infantry and mechanized forces to take Ukrainian territory,

Russia's failure to use operational fires in a coordinated way that enables maneuver, and Ukraine's effective utilization of defense in depth. For the United States, increased sanctions on Russia and continuing U.S. and European military assistance to Ukraine would likely raise the costs for Moscow of a protracted war and could facilitate peace talks.

The rest of this analysis is divided into three sections. The first examines Russian objectives and the Russian way of war in Ukraine. The second section analyzes four indicators of Russian military performance: the average rate of advance, the amount of territory seized, the amount of equipment destroyed, and total fatalities and casualties. The third section provides broader implications.

THE RUSSIAN WAY OF WAR

Vladimir Putin's primary objective is likely to bring Ukraine back into Russia's sphere of influence, either directly by militarily conquering and annexing Ukraine or indirectly by installing a Russian ally in Kyiv. Putin has been clear and consistent in claiming—falsely—that Ukraine is not, and has never been, an independent country with a distinct culture, history, religion, or language. In his article “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” Putin noted that Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarussians are descendants of Ancient Rus and “bound together by one language (which we now refer to as Old Russian), economic ties . . . and—after the baptism of Rus—the Orthodox faith.”⁷ Paraphrasing the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol, Putin asked, “How can this heritage be divided between Russia and Ukraine? And why do it?”⁸ Putin continued that “there was no historical basis” for “the idea of Ukrainian people as a nation separate from the Russians.”⁹

After failing to bring Ukraine back into Russia's orbit by seizing Crimea in 2014 and then using a combination of regular and irregular military units in eastern Ukraine, Putin resorted to a conventional invasion in February 2022. The Russian military was unable to swiftly defeat Ukrainian forces through a blitzkrieg campaign and has since resorted to an attrition strategy to conquer Ukrainian territory and defeat the Ukrainian military.

A war of attrition is one in which a belligerent attempts to wear its opponent down through piecemeal destruction of its military, including matériel and personnel.¹⁰ The essence of attrition is best described by Carl von Clausewitz, who wrote that it is a mistake to believe that there is “a skillful method of disarming and overcoming an enemy without causing great bloodshed.” Instead, Clausewitz con-

tended that “war is an act of violence pushed to its utmost bounds” and that the side “that uses force unsparingly, without reference to the bloodshed involved, must obtain a superiority if his adversary uses less vigor in its application.”¹¹ In attrition warfare, the belligerents are mainly concerned with overpowering their adversaries in a series of bloody set-piece battles that minimize exposure to enemy fire. These battles can be characterized by high casualties, massive expenditures of matériel, and limited movement of front lines. In attrition warfare, a successful offensive operation pushes the defender backward along a front line, much like a bulldozer. There is limited expectation of delivering a knockout blow in which a specific action quickly renders the opponent unable to fight.

Attrition can be distinguished from maneuver warfare, in which an attacker attempts to defeat an enemy decisively without relying on bloody set-piece battles to wear down the enemy.¹² For example, Nazi Germany adopted a blitzkrieg strategy in the early phases of World War II to rapidly defeat France, Belgium, and other European militaries. The United States employed such a strategy during Operation Desert Storm in 1990–91 and Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003, as did Israel during the 1967 Six-Day War. While Putin may have hoped that Russia’s military would quickly defeat Ukrainian forces and topple the government in February 2022, it failed to do so.

Since early 2024, Russia has held the initiative in the war in Ukraine.¹³ As used here, “initiative” involves attacking—or threatening to attack—an enemy to force it to react or deny it the ability to act. As described by British Major R.G. Cherry, the initiative is also “the power of making our adversary’s movements conform to our own.”¹⁴ With the exception of some limited Ukrainian operations—most notably the cross-border incursion into Russia’s Kursk region in 2024—Russia has generally been on the offensive since January 2024 (and even in some areas, such as Avdiivka, since October 2023). During this period, Russia’s offensive campaign has involved several components.

First, Russia has used dismounted infantry (including human wave attacks) and mechanized forces to wear down and attrit Ukrainian lines by killing and wounding Ukrainian soldiers, destroying equipment, undermining morale, and otherwise targeting Ukraine’s capacity to fight.¹⁵ Russian forces have also utilized small first-person-view (FPV) and other drones, artillery, glide bombs, and a range of other stand-off weapons. A glide bomb is a low-cost, conventional

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bomb modified with deployable wings and a relatively inexpensive global navigation satellite system guidance kit. Glide bombs have been particularly deadly at penetrating Ukrainian airspace and hitting targets because of their speed, low thermal profile, and ability to saturate defenses when fired in large numbers.¹⁶

At the tactical level, Russian units have routinely conducted advances using small squads of troops, often poorly trained, that are supported by armored vehicles or light mobility vehicles. These forces can include company tactical groups, modified tactical breakthrough groups, and special assault detachments.¹⁷ Higher Russian headquarters frequently order these forces to advance toward Ukrainian positions to conduct reconnaissance by drawing fire. If the soldiers encounter resistance, Russian military commanders may assess the best lines of approach and boundaries—including the seams—between defensive units. If Ukrainian positions are positively identified, Russian soldiers are then routinely sent forward to attack positions, which are further mapped and then targeted with artillery, FPV drones, and glide bombs. When rotation or disruption of the defense is achieved, Russian units aim to conduct more deliberate assault actions.¹⁸ These tactics have led to high fatalities and casualties.

Second, Russia has utilized stand-off strikes from ground, air, and naval platforms to terrorize Ukrainian civilians through a punishment strategy.¹⁹ Examples include cruise and ballistic missiles (fired from Tu-160 and Tu-95MS bombers, Tu-22M3 bombers, MiG-31K fighters, and Su-34 fighters), strike and reconnaissance unmanned aircraft systems (UASs), small FPV drones, and artillery fire. But the Russian military has not used long-range fires effectively to shape the battlefield and set the conditions for maneuver warfare.²⁰ As one CSIS analysis concluded, “Despite inheriting a military doctrine steeped in deep battle, reconnaissance-strike complexes, and precision

Figure 1: Ukraine Battlefield Map, June 2025



Source: UK Ministry of Defence, (@DefenceHQ), X post, May 16, 2025, 1:56 am, <https://x.com/DefenceHQ/status/1923301443907342411/photo/1>.

noncontact warfare, Russia has consistently failed to employ operational fires in a way that reflects this legacy. Instead, firepower has become unmoored from maneuver.”²¹ In addition, the Russian military has suffered from weak coordination of units and a lack of battlefield flexibility and initiative of soldiers.

Ukrainian forces have also imposed significant costs with their defense in depth in a war that has largely favored the defending side.²² Ukraine has used trenches, dragon’s teeth, mines, and other barriers—along with artillery and drones—to attrit advancing Russian soldiers and vehicles. Figures 2a and 2b show Ukrainian defensive positions—including trenches and dragon’s teeth—near the town of Andriivka in Donetsk Oblast in eastern Ukraine during a Russian offensive operation. Dragon’s teeth are anti-tank fortifications formed by truncated pyramids, usually made of reinforced concrete, designed

to impede the mobility of main battle tanks and other vehicles.²³ Ukrainian tactics are premised on extending the depth of their fires and dispersing their force to avoid casualties. In response to the threat from fires, Ukrainian units have dug in extensively to reduce force density.²⁴ Ukraine has also conducted several stunning operations, including smuggling drones deep inside Russia and using them to target and destroy Russian Tupolev bombers in June 2025.

Russia has some advantages with a substantial industrial base and an ability to mobilize a much larger number of soldiers. Nevertheless, the Russian military has struggled to conduct ground force operations at scale, overcome prepared Ukrainian defenses, or break through Ukrainian lines to achieve operationally significant gains. The Russian military has also faced challenges with force quality and the loss of experienced officers.²⁵ In spite of heavy losses,

Figure 2a: Ukrainian Trenches Near Andriivka, Donetsk Oblast

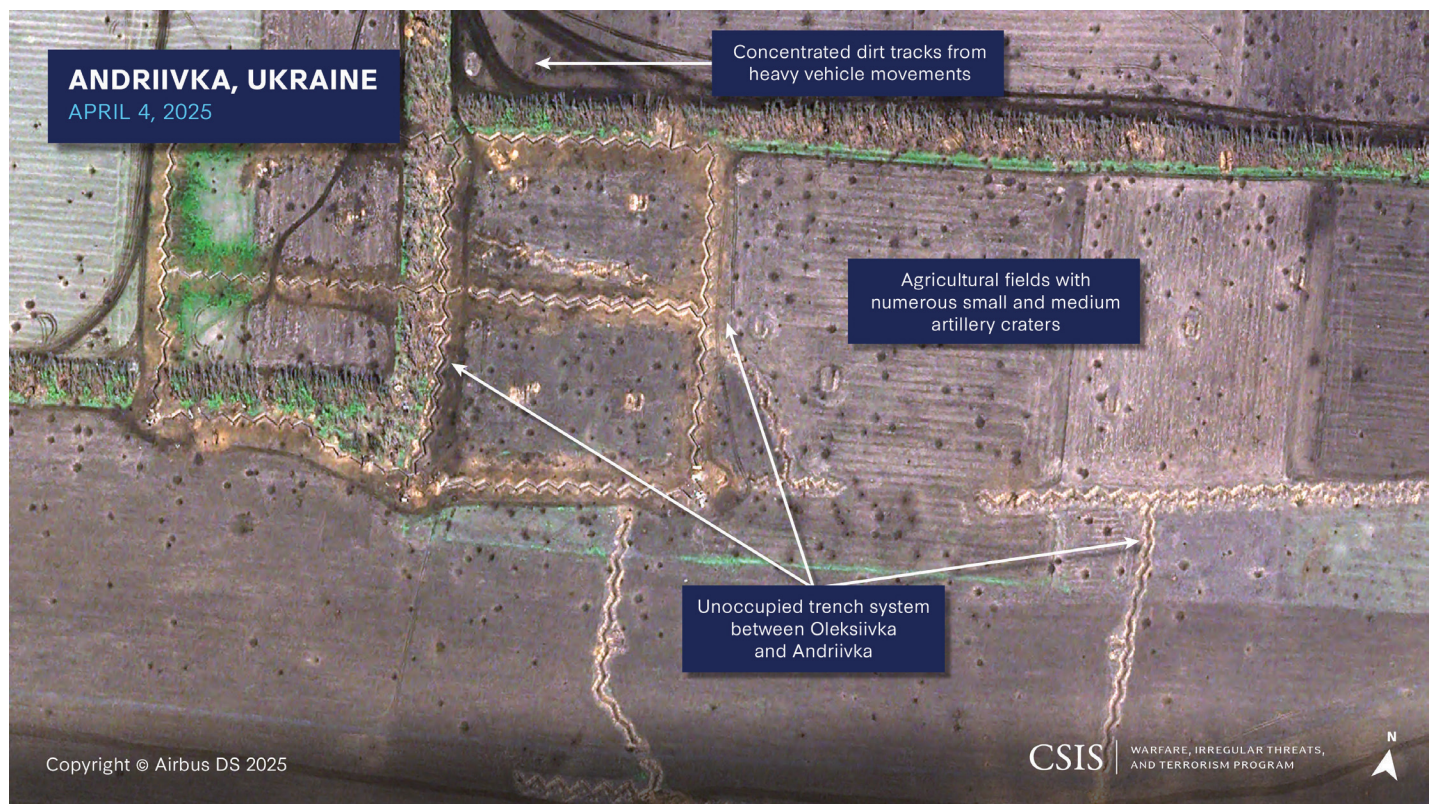
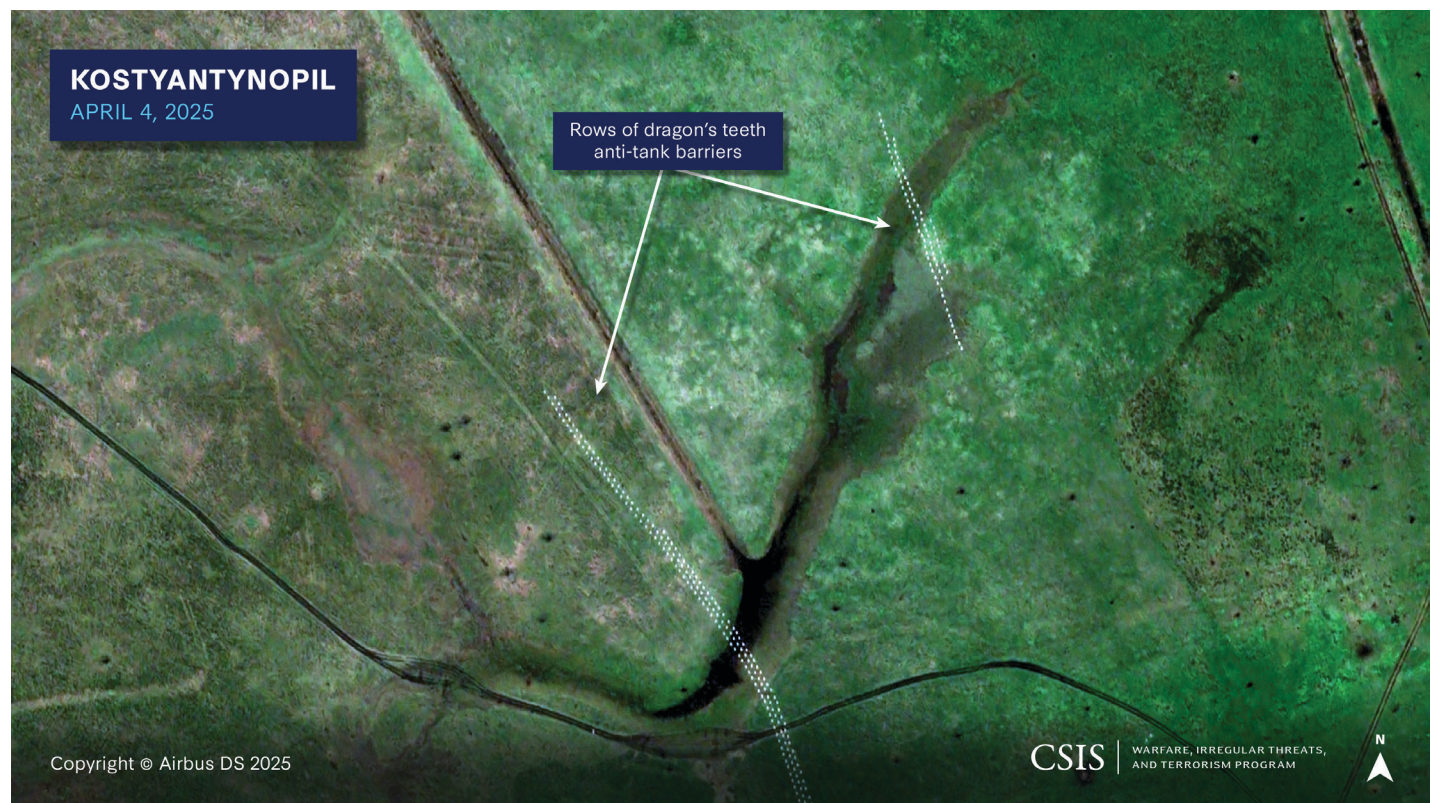


Figure 2b: Ukrainian Dragon's Teeth Near Andriivka, Donetsk Oblast



the Kremlin has likely pinned its hopes of winning on a U.S. decision to end its military assistance to Ukraine. The next section turns to a more systematic analysis of Russia's battlefield performance.

RUSSIA'S BATTLEFIELD PERFORMANCE

This section uses four indicators to measure Russia's progress since January 2024: the rate of advance, the amount of territory captured, the amount of equipment lost, and total fatalities and casualties.

Rate of Advance: Russia's rate of advance since January 2024 underscores the difficulty of breaking through entrenched defenses. This analysis estimates the average daily rate of Russian advance by measuring the straight-line distance that the front line shifted during specific campaigns in Ukraine. For each case, the measured distance is divided by the number of days of the campaign to calculate the average rate of advance in meters per day.

Along the Donetsk front in the east, Russia launched a renewed offensive in October 2023 and captured the fortified city of Avdiivka in February 2024 after one of the war's most intense battles.²⁶ From that point through April 2025,

Russia's ongoing Kupiansk offensive has advanced at barely more than half the rate of the Allied forces in the Battle of the Somme in World War I.

Russian forces advanced approximately 60 kilometers westward toward the city of Pokrovsk—an average of just 135 meters per day.

Russia's progress has been even slower near Kharkiv in the north. In November 2024, Russian forces launched an offensive around the city of Kupiansk, crossing the Oskil River and pushing westward in an effort to encircle the city. Over the next five months, they advanced roughly 8 kilometers at the furthest point, averaging just 50 meters per day. Elsewhere along the front line, Russia has made little to no progress pushing Ukrainian forces back since January 2024.

Figures 3a-3d show the battlefield near the town of Andriivka in Donetsk Oblast, where Ukrainian forces destroyed a column of Russian armored vehicles in early April 2025. An explosion disabled the lead vehi-

Figure 3a: Battlefield Laydown Near Andriivka, Donetsk Oblast



Figure 3b: Destroyed Russian Vehicles Near Andriivka, Donetsk Oblast



Figure 3c: Destroyed Russian Vehicles Near Andriivka, Donetsk Oblast



Figure 3d: Destroyed Russian Vehicles Near Andriivka, Donetsk Oblast



cle, which blockaded the remaining vehicles along the T-0428 Andriivka-Novopavlivka highway. Russian infantry dismounted from the vehicles and Ukrainian forces targeted them using drones and artillery. Roughly 12 Russian armored vehicles and tanks were destroyed or damaged.²⁷

The slow pace of Russia's recent advances is part of a broader pattern that has defined the war in Ukraine. Both sides now operate along extensively fortified front lines featuring dense minefields, trench systems, anti-armor obstacles, and fortified artillery positions. These defenses impose severe costs on attacking forces and dramatically limit potential breakthroughs.

By contrast, during the first year of the war in 2022, surprise and the absence of fortified defenses in many areas allowed attackers to maneuver more freely and achieve

rapid breakthroughs in sweeping offensives. For example, during the initial phase of Russia's invasion from February to April 2022, Russian forces advanced approximately 120 kilometers south from Belarus toward Kyiv, averaging about 3,120 meters per day. Along a separate axis, they advanced roughly 250 kilometers west through Sumy and Chernihiv toward Kyiv's eastern outskirts, an average pace of 6,675 meters per day.

Likewise, in the fall of 2022, Ukraine conducted multiple successful offensives. In the north, Ukrainian forces retook the city of Kharkiv and surrounding areas in a blistering offensive that advanced an average of 7,400 meters per day. Around the same time, Ukrainian forces advanced an average of 590 meters a day in the south, retaking the city of Kherson and surrounding territory.

Figure 4: Rates of Advance for Selected Combined Arms Offensives, 1914-2025

Dates	Offensive	Attacker	Defender	Defense	Average Advance (Meters Per Day)
August 23–September 11, 1914	Galicia	Russia	Austria-Hungary	Hasty	1,580
August 8–August 18, 1916	Gorizia (Sixth Isonzo)	Italy	Austria-Hungary	Fortified	500
July 1–November 19, 1916	Somme	France and Great Britain	Germany	Fortified	80
June 1–June 26, 1918	Belleau Wood	United States	Germany	Fortified and prepared	410
January 12–January 30, 1943	Leningrad	USSR	Germany	Fortified	1,000
July 5–July 15, 1943	Kursk-Oboyan	Germany	USSR	Prepared	3,220
October 15–October 17, 1973	Deversoir (Chinese Farm)	Israel	Egypt	Hasty	5,000
September 6–September 13, 2022	Kharkiv	Ukraine	Russia	Hasty	7,400
August 29–November 11, 2022	Kherson	Ukraine	Russia	Prepared	590
June 4–August 28, 2023	Robotyne	Ukraine	Russia	Fortified	90
August 6, 2024–August 27, 2024	Kursk	Ukraine	Russia	Hasty	1,250
February 15, 2024–April 23, 2025	Avdiivka-Pokrovsk	Russia	Ukraine	Fortified	135
November 13, 2024–April 23, 2025	Kupiansk	Russia	Ukraine	Fortified	50

Source: Author's analysis from various sources.²⁸

More recently, Ukraine’s Kursk offensive illustrated the benefit of attacking with surprise against unprepared defenders, as Ukrainian troops advanced roughly 30 kilometers into Russia in three weeks, an average of approximately 1,250 meters per day.

Russia’s slow and limited advances since January 2024 are most comparable to Ukraine’s own offensive in the summer and fall of 2023, which managed to push forward at a rate of just 90 meters per day against heavily fortified Russian positions.

Figure 4 illustrates these trends by comparing the average rates of advance for major operations in Ukraine since 2022 alongside historical benchmarks from World War I, World War II, and the Yom Kippur War. Russia’s ongoing Kupiansk offensive has advanced at barely more than half the rate of the Allied forces in the Battle of the Somme in World War I, one of the most grinding offensives of the war. Even the relatively faster Avdiivka-Pokrovsk Russian offensive moved much slower than several historical campaigns, such as the U.S. offensive in the Battle of Belleau Wood.

Territorial Gains: In addition to its slow rate of advance, Russia’s territorial gains since January 2024 have been modest. Russia’s largest gains have come in the east, where it captured the city of Avdiivka and has continued to push westward toward Pokrovsk. Over the course of this offensive, Russia has seized approximately 3,100 square kilometers. In the northeast, Russia’s operations to encircle Kupiansk since November 2024 have captured approximately 500 square kilometers. Along the entire front line, Russia has captured less than 5,000 square kilometers since January 2024. By April 2025, Russian territorial gains had slowed down, with Russian ground forces seizing an average of roughly six square kilometers per day.²⁹

By comparison, these territorial gains are far smaller than those that occurred in earlier phases of the war. For example, at the peak of its initial invasion in March 2022, Russian forces had seized approximately 120,000 square kilometers of Ukrainian territory in less than five weeks.³⁰ By the end of April 2022, Ukraine had retaken approximately 50,000 square kilometers.³¹ Later that year, Ukraine’s Kharkiv and Kherson counteroffensives reclaimed roughly 17,000 square kilometers combined in approximately 11 weeks.³²

Like its slow advance, Russia’s modest territorial gains since January 2024 indicate the difficulty of breaking through entrenched defenses and sustaining large-scale

Figure 5: Equipment Losses by Type, January 2024–April 2025

Equipment	Quantity Lost
Armored Fighting Vehicles	1,233
Armored Personnel Carriers	308
Infantry Fighting Vehicles	3,238
Infantry Mobility Vehicles	182
Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) Vehicles	12
Multiple Rocket Launchers	174
Self-Propelled Artillery	320
Tanks	1,946
Towed Artillery	130
Trucks, Vehicles, and Jeeps	1,160

Data compiled by Daniel Scarnecchia from Oryx, “Attack On Europe: Documenting Russian Equipment Losses During The Russian Invasion Of Ukraine,” Oryx, <https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2022/02/attack-on-europe-documenting-equipment.html>; and “Attack On Europe: Documenting Ukrainian Equipment Losses During The Russian Invasion Of Ukraine,” Oryx, <https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2022/02/attack-on-europe-documenting-ukrainian.html>.

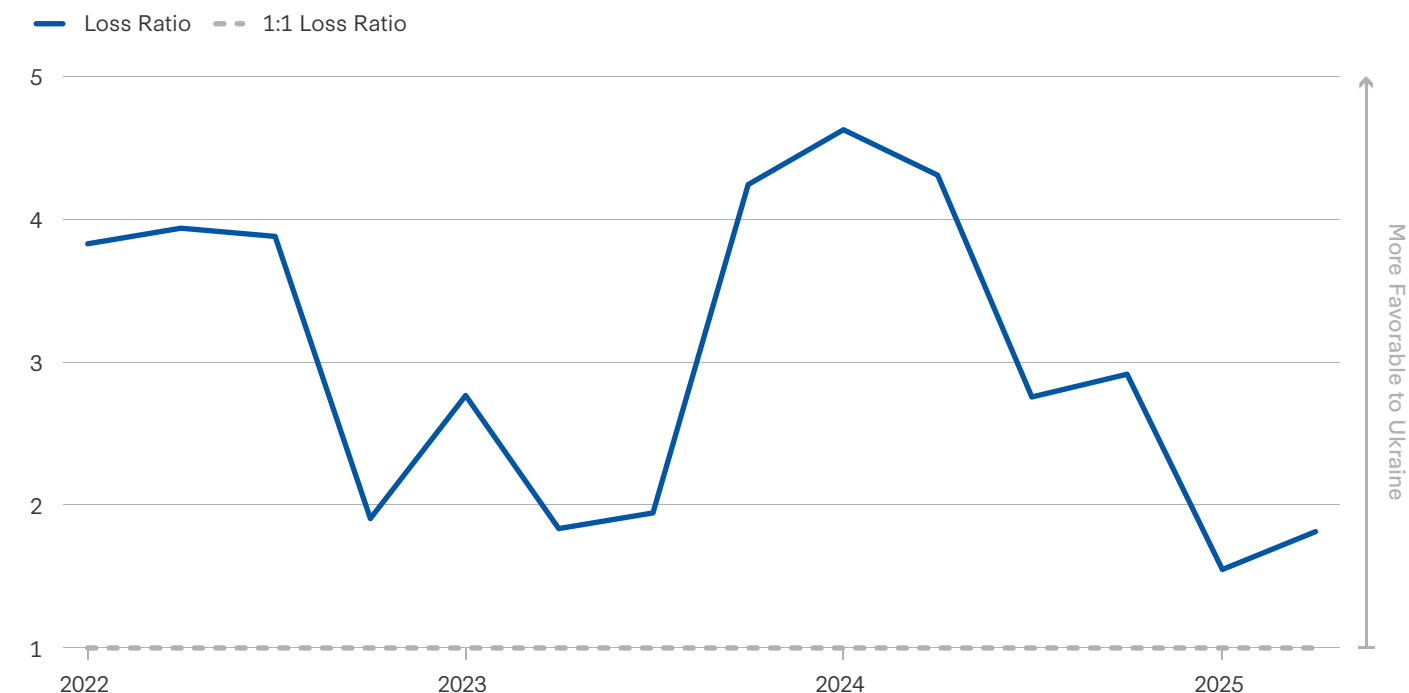
offensive operations in today’s battlefield environment. In contrast to the large exchanges of territory experienced in the first year of the war, fighting in 2025 is characterized by a grinding contest of attrition, where even limited territorial shifts typically require months of battle and offer few opportunities for decisive breakthroughs.

Equipment Losses: Equipment losses illustrate the high cost Russia has paid since January 2024 for its modest gains. As shown in Figure 5, Russia has lost substantial quantities of equipment, highlighting the steep matériel toll of sustaining offensive operations.

Attrition ratios of Russian equipment losses to Ukrainian equipment losses show the relative intensity of attrition across different phases of the war. Figure 6 plots the quarterly ratio of Russian fighting vehicle losses to Ukrainian losses based on visual confirmations. A value above 1 indicates Russia lost more matériel than Ukraine, and the higher the ratio, the more lopsided and costly Russia’s operations were.

During Russia’s initial invasion, the ratio hovered just under 4:1 as Russia’s thrusts toward Kyiv burned through

Figure 6: Loss Ratio of Russian to Ukrainian Fighting Vehicles Over Time



Data compiled by Daniel Scarnecchia from Oryx, "Attack On Europe: Documenting Russian Equipment Losses During The Russian Invasion Of Ukraine," Oryx, <https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2022/02/attack-on-europe-documenting-equipment.html>; and "Attack On Europe: Documenting Ukrainian Equipment Losses During The Russian Invasion Of Ukraine," Oryx, <https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2022/02/attack-on-europe-documenting-ukrainian.html>.³³

fighting vehicles far faster than Ukraine lost its own. The ratio dropped in the fall of 2022 to around 2:1 when Ukraine went on the offensive at Kharkiv and Kherson and incurred higher losses. A smaller crest followed in early 2023 as Russia escalated its assault on Bakhmut, followed by another dip in the summer of 2023 during Ukraine's Donetsk and Zaporizhzhia counteroffensives. The steepest spike appeared in late 2023 and early 2024, rising to a ratio of nearly 5:1 when Russia captured Avdiivka. Since mid-2024, the ratio has generally declined and in May 2025 it was approximately 2:1.

Changes in the Russian-to-Ukrainian fighting vehicles loss ratio underscore the growing inefficiency of Moscow's invasion. In early 2024, Russia experienced loss ratios higher than those it suffered during its initial 2022 invasion in exchange for only a fraction of the territorial

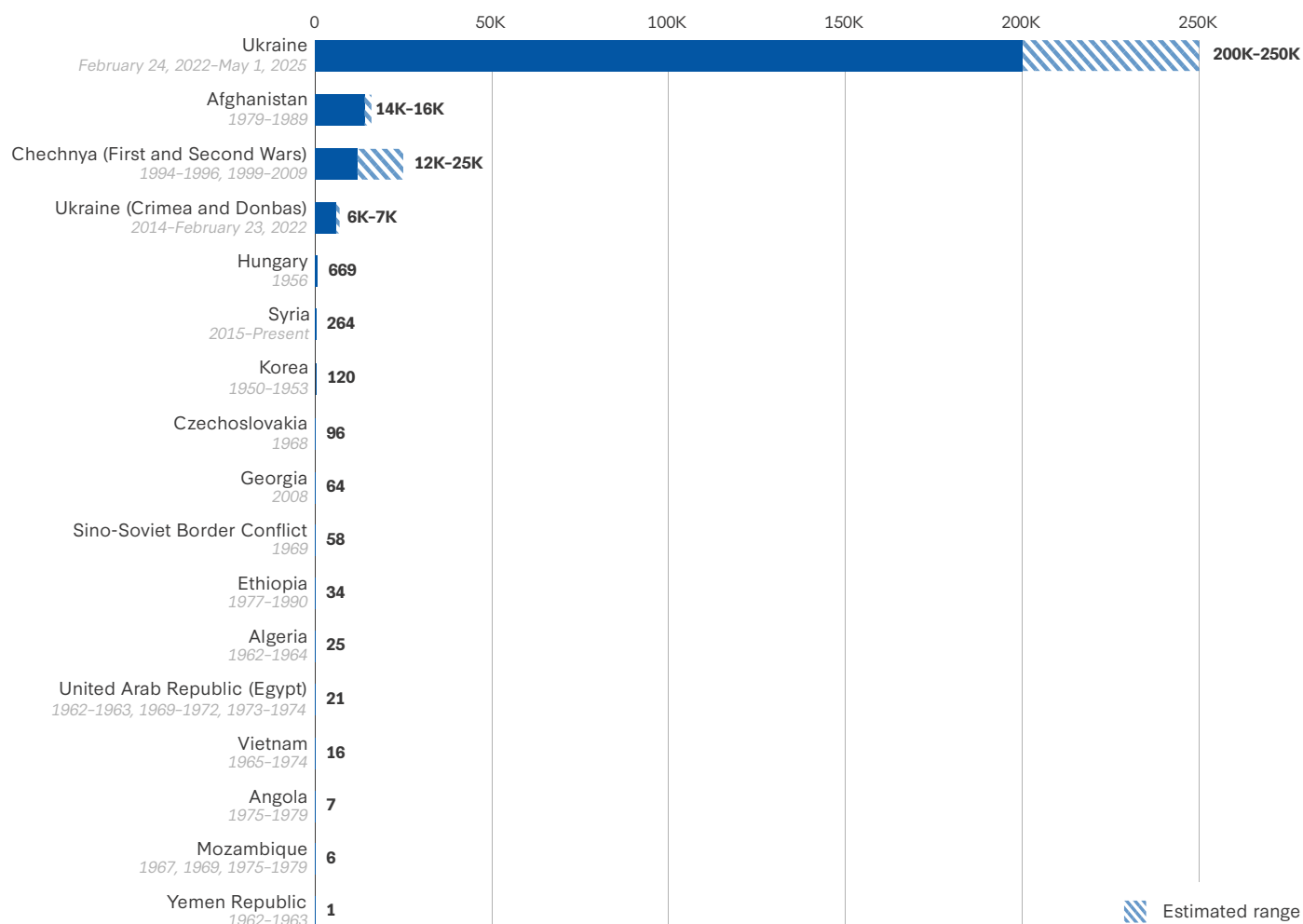
gains. Russia's offensives since January 2024 yielded only marginal territorial gains but consistently suffered unfavorable loss ratios. The disparity points to the challenge of attempting repeated frontal assaults into well-prepared defenses and Russia's reliance on mass rather than maneuver. Russia has attempted to offset these losses by greatly increasing its domestic defense production and supplementing with foreign supplies, including from China, Iran, and North Korea.³⁴

Although the Kremlin appears willing to absorb high attrition in a bid to outlast Kyiv, the sustained disproportionate equipment loss rate erodes its capacity to generate fresh, high-quality formations for the decisive breakthroughs it still seeks. Since January 2024, Russia has traded vast quantities of equipment for mere meters of ground—a strategy that decisively falls short of Moscow's objective to greatly expand its control of Ukrainian territory.

Fatalities and Casualties: Russia has also suffered significant fatalities and casualties. As Figure 7 shows, there were as many as 250,000 Russian fatalities in Ukraine between February 2022 and May 2025, compared to a high of roughly 50,000 total Soviet and Russian fatalities in all wars combined between World War II and February 2022.

Since January 2024, Russia has traded vast quantities of equipment for mere meters of ground.

Figure 7: Russian Fatalities in Selected Wars, 1946-2025



Source: Author's analysis from various sources.³⁵

That means that Russia has suffered as many as five times the number of fatalities in Ukraine (in just over 3 years) as in all Russian and Soviet wars *combined* since World War II (covering roughly 77 years). No Soviet or Russian war since World War II has even come close to Ukraine in terms of fatality rate.

In addition, over 950,000 Russian soldiers have been killed and wounded since the war began.³⁶ As Figure 8 highlights, Russia's daily average of casualties has increased every year since 2022. However, many of the soldiers killed and wounded in Ukraine are from Russia's Far North, Far East, and prisons—and are not the children of Moscow and St. Petersburg elites. Putin likely considers these types of soldiers more expendable and less likely to undermine his domestic political support base.³⁷

Ukrainian fatality rates are also high at between 60,000 and 100,000 Ukrainian soldiers killed, with a total of 400,000 casualties (which include both killed and wounded).³⁸

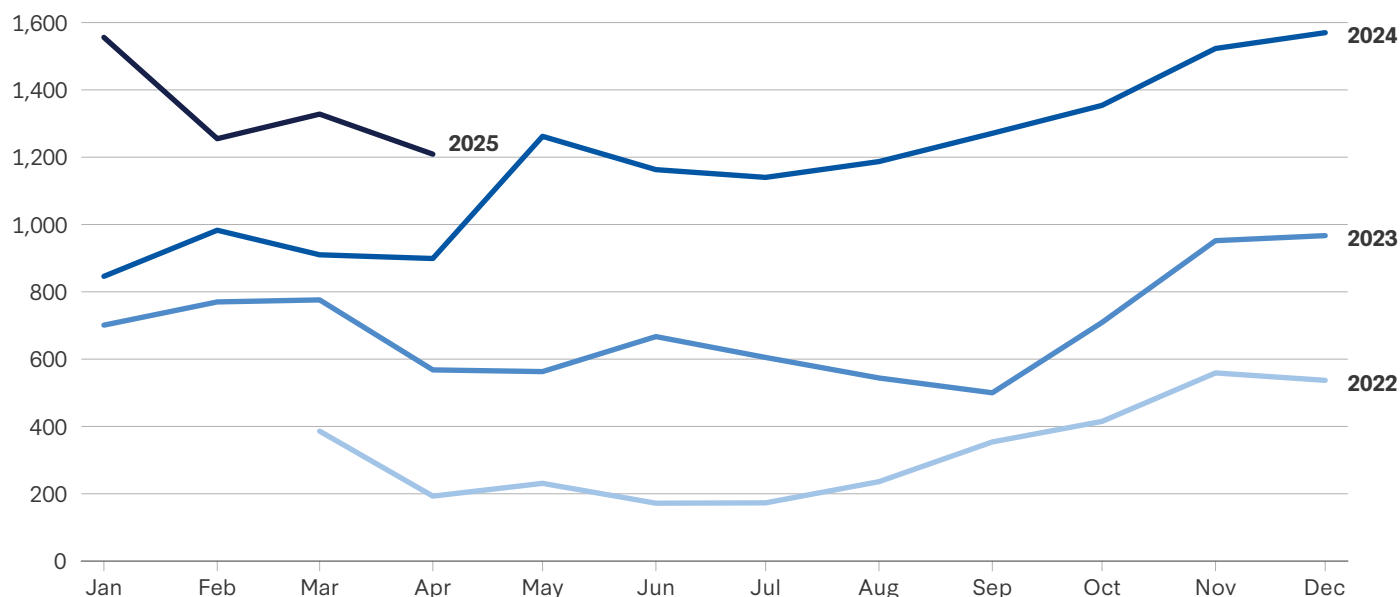
RUSSIA DOES NOT HOLD ALL THE CARDS

Russia has struggled in Ukraine. As this analysis shows, Russian military forces have failed to significantly advance on the battlefield, seized limited territory, lost substantial quantities of equipment relative to Ukraine, and suffered high rates of fatalities and casualties. Russia has paid an extraordinary blood price for seizing less than 1 percent of Ukrainian territory since January 2024.

Russian attrition has likely been caused by several factors: Russia's reliance on dismounted infantry attacks to take Ukrainian territory, Russia's failure to employ operational fires in a way that facilitates maneuver, and Ukraine's effective defenses and tactics in a defense-dominant war.

The Kremlin's main hope to win on the battlefield is for the United States to cut off aid to Ukraine and walk away from the conflict. Moscow's aspiration is likely grounded in the U.S. decision to end aid to the Syrian opposition around

Figure 8: Russian Daily Average of Casualties, March 2022–April 2025



Source: UK Ministry of Defence (@DefenceHQ), X, May 3, 2025, 12:08 am, <https://x.com/DefenceHQ/status/1918563185390502173/photo/2>.

2015–16 (which allowed the Russian- and Iranian-backed Bashar al-Assad regime to defeat most insurgent forces) and the U.S. decision to withdraw from Afghanistan in 2021 (which allowed the Taliban regime to overthrow the Ashraf Ghani government in August 2021).

Wars of attrition frequently come down to mass and defense industrial mobilization. As the historian Paul Kennedy wrote in *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, it is “incontestable” that “in a long-drawn-out Great Power (and usually coalition) war, victory has repeatedly gone to the side with the more flourishing productive base—or, as the Spanish captains used to say, to him who has the last escudo.”³⁹ The victorious side is often the one that can more readily replace the soldiers and equipment—including artillery, air defense systems, munitions, and armored vehicles—that are lost in huge numbers.

Yet even in cases when attrition warfare is ultimately successful, it has huge costs. Winning a war of attrition requires a willingness to absorb considerable casualties and significant losses of equipment.⁴⁰ In Ukraine, Russia has some advantages in population size and industrial mobilization, particularly with the help of China, Iran, North Korea, and other countries. European and U.S. aid is critical for Ukraine, and an end of U.S. assistance would likely tip the balance in favor of Russia.⁴¹

But Moscow does not hold all, or even most, of the cards. It has at least two vulnerabilities that the United States and Europe could better exploit.

The first is Russia’s economy. Russia is grappling with stubborn inflation, labor shortages, and limited paths to economic growth. The country’s economy is seriously exposed in oil and gas, which make up between 30 percent and 50 percent of Russia’s total federal budget revenue.⁴² Increased sanctions against Russia’s energy sector—including sanctions against any country that buys Russian oil (what policymakers call “secondary sanctions”)—would likely cause major pain. One analysis estimated that secondary sanctions against Russia would cause Kremlin oil revenues to drop by 20 percent while raising gasoline prices in the United States only 15 cents per gallon.⁴³

Energy sanctions could be combined with sanctions against other Russian exports, such as minerals, metals, agricultural goods, and fertilizers. Some members of Congress, such as Lindsey Graham (R-SC) and Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), have introduced legislation that imposes additional primary and secondary sanctions against Russia. The legislation includes up to 500 percent tariffs on imported goods from countries that buy Russian oil, gas, uranium, and other products.⁴⁴ The United States

Russia has paid an extraordinary blood price for seizing less than 1 percent of Ukrainian territory since January 2024.

and Europe could also seize approximately \$300 billion in frozen Russian assets and use them to provide Ukraine with sustainable assistance.

A second Russian vulnerability is the blood cost of a protracted war, particularly if it erodes Putin's political support base. As this analysis has outlined, Russia has suffered massive numbers of fatalities and casualties. If Moscow continues to drag its feet on peace talks, a U.S. decision to provide more weapons, intelligence, and training to Ukraine would escalate Russia's battlefield costs. U.S. Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS), High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS), 155-mm artillery rounds, air defense systems, and other weapons systems and intelligence assistance have seriously complicated Russia's offensive campaign. And unlike the forever wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States has not lost any soldiers in Ukraine. American military assistance has also benefited workers in Arizona, California, Florida, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Texas, and other states where these weapons systems are developed and produced.

Yet despite Russia's vulnerabilities, the United States has failed to wield either the economic or military cudgel. Without serious pain, Putin will continue to drag the peace talks out, keep fighting, and wait for the United States to walk away.

The United States holds many of the cards in Ukraine. It just needs to start playing them. ■

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ENDNOTES

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