

An elite Russian brigade of 5,000 soldiers has been destroyed and reformed as many as 8 times after heavy losses, report says

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A Ukrainian tank is seen, as Russia's attack on Ukraine continues, near the front line city of Vuhledar, Ukraine February 18, 2023 Yevhen Titov/Reuters© Yevhen Titov/Reuters

An elite Russian brigade has been destroyed and reformed as many as eight times since the start of the war, the Institute for the Study of War (ISW), a Washington-based think tank, said in a [report](#) on Friday.

The Russian 155th Naval Infantry Brigade has been repeatedly destroyed partly due to losses it has faced during Russia's efforts to take the town of Vuhledar in eastern Ukraine.

At one point the entire brigade, which consisted of 5,000 troops, was reported to be destroyed near Vuhledar.

Soldiers were killed, wounded, or taken prisoner, Oleksiy Dmytrashkivskyi, head of the united press center of the Tavriskiy District of Ukrainian defense forces, [told Politico on February 12](#).

Dmytrashkivskyi estimated at the time that Russian forces were losing 150-300 marines a day near the coal-mining town.

The town of Vuhledar has been the center of intense fighting in January and February as Russian troops have repeatedly attempted and failed to seize it. Sporadic fighting has continued since mid-February, but at a lower intensity.

Russian forces have experienced high casualties in Vuhledar and have lost dozens of vehicles. Videos have emerged of Russian tanks and armored vehicles [repeatedly being blown up](#) by mines and anti-tank missiles near the town.

Russia's tactical errors and battlefield losses even sparked *rare criticism* from Russian military bloggers, despite the fact that criticizing the war is outlawed in Russia.

The ISW noted that intense criticism about Russian failures in Vuhledar was re-emerging following the failed assaults in the early months of the year, and ongoing fears about a possible Ukrainian counteroffensive.

Some of these military bloggers have criticized the Russian military command for ordering ineffective human-wave style frontal assaults in Vuhledar, according to ISW. This tactic, which involves an initial frontal assault followed by assaults against fortified Ukrainian flanks, has led to little gains and high combat losses due to the challenging terrain, a lack of combat power, and failure to surprise Ukrainian forces.



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5 of the biggest surprises of Putin's devastating war in Ukraine

- When Russian forces invaded Ukraine in late February, Putin and other observers expected the country to crumble fast.
- Over 10 months later Ukraine still stands, and its forces has even liberated occupied lands.
- Throughout this conflict, there have been surprises on both sides. Here are 5 of the biggest twists.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin expected victory to come quickly and without trouble when his forces invaded Ukraine.
- When the Russian leader delivered his televised war declaration on February 24, sending his troops forward to carry out a large-scale invasion, he anticipated that Kyiv *would fall* in a matter of days — a grave assessment *echoed* by US and Western intelligence, as well as many think tank experts and analysts.
- More than 10 months later, the city of nearly 3 million people remains in Ukrainian hands. The country's forces have managed to not only weather Moscow's invasion on multiple fronts, but have even pushed Russian troops back in some areas, liberating thousands of square miles of territory that had fallen to Russian troops early in the war.
- US officials have declared Putin's war efforts in Ukraine a *"failure."* That said, there is still no end in sight for the sight for this devastating conflict that has caused *hundreds of thousands* of *casualties* and left Ukrainian cities in ruins.

- *The poor performance of the Russian military has **surprised** Putin and other observers, but it's only one of several unexpected twists in the past 10 months of war. Here are some other unforeseen moments.*



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- *The way Russia invaded and the failures that came with it*
- *The earliest — and perhaps biggest — surprise was the way that Russia carried out its invasion of Ukraine.*
- *Seeming to overestimate the strength of his armed forces and underestimate the will of Ukraine to resist, Putin — and some Western intelligence — **expected Kyiv** would not be able to hold out more than a few days.*
- *Miscalculations by Russian leadership coupled with the poor communication of objectives to officers and troops tasked with fighting the war, however, let to an array of Russian **mistakes and blunders** during the early days of the war, like units finding themselves isolated or struggling with substantial logistical problems.*
- *Russian forces were expected to move in large groups consisting of soldiers, armor, and artillery, conducting combined arms warfare with air support and other assets, but that didn't happen.*
- *"We would have thought that they would have done a much more deliberate, well-thought-through operation. That is not what they did," Jeffrey Edmonds, a Russia expert at the Center for Naval Analyses and former CIA military analyst, told Insider, explaining that Russia didn't lead with a massive air campaign and its soldiers were basically just told to drive to Kyiv.*
- *"That's not the way we at all thought that they would invade," he said.*



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- *Ukraine's ability to not only stop the Russians but drive them back*
- *Heading into the war, Russia greatly underestimated the will of the Ukrainian people to defend their homeland and the strength and combat capability of the country's military.*
- *"Another surprise was the level of capability of the Ukrainians to defend against the invasion, despite Russian screw ups," Edmonds said. "And that's continued throughout."*
- *Ukraine managed to not only protect Kyiv against the advancing Russian troops, but it even managed to force their retreat from the capital region after just a few weeks. Beyond that, Ukrainian troops have since managed to liberate thousands of square miles of territory from Russian occupation during various counteroffensives along the war's northeastern and southern fronts.*
- *One significant achievement was the recent [liberation](#) of Kherson. This southern city was the first major city captured by Putin's forces and the only regional capital Russian troops had managed to seize. It was a big early war win for Russia, but it was unable to hold it.*
- *The weapons Ukraine had to fight the war and the way they were used on the battlefield have made a tremendous difference.*
- *Edmonds said the effectiveness of US-provided High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS), and Ukraine's ability to integrate [these weapons](#) into its arsenal, were unexpected. These rocket launchers were much-sought-after by Ukraine, and quickly became celebrated among the country's armed forces and its top officials for the damage they could deliver to Russian forces.*



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- *The Kharkiv counteroffensive that hit in the northeast as everyone was looking south*
- *After months of fighting in a grinding and slow-moving conflict in Ukraine's eastern Donbas region, Kyiv's forces launched two major counteroffensives along the war's northeastern and southern fronts.*
- *Only the southern offensive to retake Kherson had been expected, as Ukraine had been telegraphing that one for months. As Russian troops moved to defend along the southern front, Ukrainian forces suddenly hit hard from unexpected direction.*
- *Ukraine's northeastern counteroffensive, which was focused in the Kharkiv region, began in late summer and featured a blitz-style push on Russian positions. The advance quickly turned into a rout that forced Russian troops to abandon [massive amounts of weaponry](#) and saw Ukraine liberate huge chunks of land.*
- *Edmonds said the Kharkiv counteroffensive was a "big surprise" to everyone, including the Ukrainians, especially considering the "extent and speed" of Ukraine's advances.*
- *Ukraine has "shown a remarkable ability to take advantages of opportunities that present themselves on the battlefield, and the current counteroffensive in Kharkiv is no exception to that," Pentagon Press Secretary Air Force Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder said in mid-September.*



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- *Explosive attacks behind Russian lines that stirred instability and fear at rear positions*
- *Another unexpected aspect of the war in Ukraine has been the number of attacks far behind the line in Russian-controlled territory. There have been attacks in occupied areas like the Crimean peninsula but also in Russia.*
- *Earlier this month, a handful of Russian bases — two of them located hundreds of miles from the Ukraine border — were [rocked by explosions](#). The attacks were reportedly the result of [drones launched](#) from Ukrainian territory, though Kyiv denied involvement.*
- *The Russian defense ministry blamed the attacks on Soviet-era drones. Although there was some speculation on the type, it is unclear. That Russian bases could be targeted so deep within the country raised eyebrows, as it pointed to a [major force protection failure](#) and a longer reach than expected for Ukraine.*
- *"I don't think anybody foresaw them having UAV capability that could reach into Russia and attack strategic air bases," Edmonds said.*
- *And those strikes were not isolated instances. A few weeks prior, Ukraine appeared to attack Russia's naval forces at southern Crimea's [Sevastopol](#) using unmanned surface vehicles (USVs) and UAVs.*
- *Although the use of drones throughout this conflict has not been a surprise, Edmonds said that "some of the ways in which they've been used, and the success of the operations with them, have been somewhat surprising."*



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- *The extent of Western support for Ukraine*
- *Immediately after Russia's February 24 invasion, Western countries wasted no time in banding together to condemn Putin for launching the attack — a response that the Russian leader did not anticipate, at least not at the level seen throughout the war.*
- *Ten months into this conflict, countries from NATO and the European Union have since stayed relatively unified in their support for Ukraine, providing military and humanitarian aid while also slapping round after round of sanctions on Russia.*
- *Putin's miscalculations on the strength of a united Western response, meanwhile, have opened the door to NATO expansion, something he has historically been **strongly against**. The war has even led some countries — like Germany and Switzerland — to **reverse** various military, foreign, and financial policies.*
- *"I think both the US response and the European solidarity on [the war] were surprising to everybody." Edmonds said. "I just think there's this upwelling feeling of like, this just isn't acceptable."*
- *For now, the war continues with no clear immediate off-ramp. Despite significant setbacks for Russia in this conflict, Moscow has signaled that it intends to continue its fight. Putin himself has said this will be a **long process**, and Ukraine is **bracing for the possibility** of new Russian offensives in the new year.*