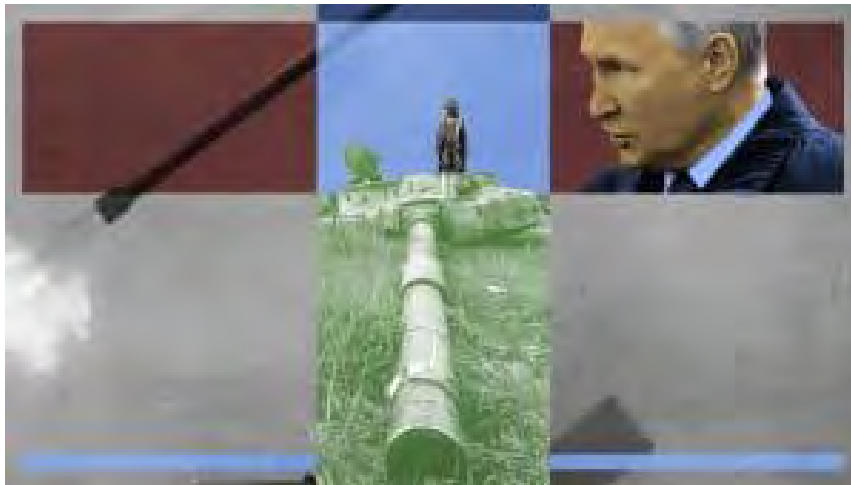


**Why “he Russian army just isn't very good”**  
**Peter Weber - The Week US**



Vladimir Putin. Illustrated | Getty Images, iStock© Illustrated | Getty Images, iStock

***A glance behind Moscow's military failures***

*Books will be written about Russia's failures in Ukraine, and Ukraine's unexpectedly strong resistance in the face of an invasion by its much larger, better armed, and more powerful neighbor.*

*Russian President Vladimir Putin's Feb. 24, 2022, lightning strike to capture Kyiv, the capital, was repulsed. And Russia's backup plan, redeploying its attributed forces to seize more territory in Ukraine's east and south, has failed more than it has succeeded.*

*Ukraine is humiliating the Kremlin — [killing its generals](#), [sinking its battleships](#), [destroying or capturing its tanks](#), [pushing back Russian advances](#), [reclaiming lost territory](#) — but it isn't winning. Russia has killed thousands of Ukrainian civilians and soldiers, flattened major cities and small towns, pushed Ukraine's economy [onto Western life support](#), and taken a big swath of Ukraine's territory.*

*Russia may yet meet some of its redefined military objectives in Ukraine. But Moscow's mighty army, previously thought to be the second-most-powerful in the world, is struggling right now. What's going on?*

***Russia had unrealistic expectations***

*"The reality," U.S. Director of National Intelligence [Avril Haines told the Senate](#) in May 2022, is that "Putin faces a mismatch between his ambitions and Russia's current conventional military capabilities."*

*Russia's original war aim "was to inflict a decisive blow on Ukraine that would transform the country's political institutions," [Zack Beauchamp writes at Vox](#). Putin's early retreat from Kyiv and the rest of northern Ukraine "de facto conceded that its fundamental war aim was outside of its power." His losses since then confirmed it.*

*Russia's war in Ukraine "is already a strategic failure," [says Olga Oliker at the International Crisis Group](#). "What they wanted out of this was a compliant Ukraine*

*run by people friendly to Russia. This does not seem like a plausible outcome — and, aside from that, their forces have proven to be much less capable than almost everyone thought."*

*utin has "already lost Ukraine," President Biden [assessed Feb. 8](#). He assumed Russian forces would "get a welcome by every Russian speaker" in Ukraine and "that NATO would collapse" and "be afraid to act," but "go down the line, none of that's happening."*

### ***Ukraine exploited Russian missteps***

*When Russia launched its invasion, it tried to quickly seize Kyiv and other major population centers, assuming there would be "light Ukrainian resistance, which did not end up being the case," [Vox's Beauchamp writes](#).*

*Russian forces were also "undercut by poor logistics and a decision to travel on open roads that created easy opportunities for ambushes. The Ukrainians took advantage, raiding Russia's weak supply lines and stymieing the Russians in brutal block-to-block fighting" and [savagely drone attacks](#) on Russian armor.*

*Early footage and news reports showed "Russia's armored vehicles abandoned for lack of fuel, its soldiers foraging for food, its transport planes shot out of the sky, its various military elements — tanks, infantry, aircraft — unable to coordinate their aims," [Fred Kaplan notes at Slate](#). Putin wanted a blitzkrieg, "but the Russian army isn't cut out for lightning strikes."*

*"If we've learned anything in this conflict so far, it's that theoretical Russian advantages don't always translate to battlefield success," [Beauchamp adds](#). As the spring turned to summer, for example, Ukraine's military tricked Russia into preparing to defend a Ukrainian counteroffensive on southern Kherson, then [overran lightly guarded Russian positions in northeastern Kharkiv and parts of the Donbas](#), recapturing a wide stretch of territory.*

*Ukraine then used new, Western-supplied precision missiles to cut off Russian supply lines in Kherson and push Moscow's army out of the regional capital.*

### ***Russia failed on the electronic battlefield***

*"Among Russia's most costly mistakes when it invaded Ukraine was the expectation that it would dominate the electronic warfare part of the battle," [David Ignatius writes in The Washington Post](#).*

*When it came to jamming or intercepting communications, "the Russians overestimated their own capabilities, underestimated Ukraine's — and didn't reckon on the power of NATO military support for Kyiv."*

*Russia's electronic warfare ops were "dazzling" when it invaded Ukraine in 2014, but Ukraine sharply improved its capabilities since then and "Russia's centralized, top-down command structure" meant nobody was empowered to "make speedy fixes," [Ignatius adds](#).*

So "when their fancy communications equipment broke down, the Russians *resorted to cellphones on Ukrainian networks*, which revealed not just their plans but *their locations* — allowing *precise attacks*," including one that *killed Maj. Gen. Andrei Simonov*, "among his country's leading electronic war specialists."

Initially, Russia's ill-prepared and overstretched military "did not have time to coordinate its electronic warfare systems," so "when Russian forces attempted to jam Ukraine's communications, they also jammed their own," *Dara Massicot writes at Foreign Affairs*.

But "the Russian military has learned from its mistakes and made big adjustments, such as downsizing its objectives and mobilizing new personnel, as well as tactical ones, such as using electronic warfare tools that jam Ukrainian military communications without affecting its own."

### ***A changing balance***

"While Russia gets weaker, Ukraine gets stronger: It now has more tanks than at the start of the war, much better artillery, and *far more weapons systems* of all kinds," *Max Boot writes at the Post*. "Russian morale is poor, with officers reportedly disobeying orders; Ukrainian morale is sky-high."

and "Russia has paid a fearsome price for meager gains," *Boot adds*. "Kyiv claims that more than 25,000 Russian soldiers have been killed," probably only a slight exaggeration, and "open-source reporting confirms that Russia has lost more than 3,500 vehicles (including *some 1,500 tanks*), 121 aircraft, and nine naval vessels, including the *flagship of the Black Sea fleet*. Those are the worst losses Russia has suffered since World War II."

### ***And sanctions are taking their toll***

The U.S. and its allies have hit Russia with all kinds of punitive sanctions, many of them aimed at preventing Russia from rebuilding its arsenal. And it's working, Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo testified before Congress. "We have reports from Ukrainians that when they find Russian military equipment on the ground, it's filled with semiconductors that they took out of dishwashers and refrigerators."

"We're going to see additional impacts on the battlefield as the Russian aerospace industry and the Russian maritime industry is unable to source its parts, which they need in order to keep their planes flying, their submarines moving and their boats sailing," Raimondo deputy *Matthew Axelrod told The Wall Street Journal's Risk & Compliance Forum*.

### ***Russia's army just isn't very good***

Russia's failures are due in part to "the valiant resistance of Ukraine's army and civilian defense forces," *Slate's Kaplan writes*. "But it's also due to the fact that the Russian army just isn't very good."

Seriously, "I've watched the Russian army for years. I knew they weren't good, but I never suspected they'd were this bad," retired U.S. *Lt. Gen. Mark Hertling tweeted*. "Corruption has taken over their ranks, their government, their leadership on a scale that is mafia-like."

*In fact, Putin valorizes Russia's defeat of the Nazis in World War II "because Russia's history offers few comparable military achievements," explains Sir Lawrence Freedman, the dean of British war studies scholars.*

*The 20th century began with Russia's "humiliating defeat at the hands of Japan" and ended with Russia "humiliated by the secessionist Chechnya in one war" before winning the second only "by adopting brutal tactics."*

*Russia's bloody and costly victory in 1945 "left an abiding image of a military steamroller, a mass army crushing all before it through its sheer weight," but "it is now apparent that there is no steamroller," Freedman writes.*

*Russia started dismantling the steamroller in the 1990s, unable to "manage or justify such a large military" after the Cold War ended, Massicot adds at [Foreign Affairs](#). The smaller, more nimble, and purportedly more professionalized Russian armed forces "are not wholly incompetent or incapable of learning," and Moscow "could continue to adjust its strategy and solidify its occupied holdings in the south and east, eventually snatching a diminished variant of victory from the jaws of defeat."*

*Still, the sad irony is that both Adolf Hitler and Napoleon Bonaparte made the same kind of ruinous strategic miscalculations about Russia that Putin made with Ukraine, [Joe Donato writes at the Modern War Institute](#).*

*"Vladimir Putin is not Hitler or Napoleon, but there are striking similarities between the flawed theory of victory that under-girded his foray into Ukraine and their doomed invasions of Russia."*

*\*\*\* Updated Feb. 10, 2023: This piece has been updated throughout to reflect recent developments.*