

Ukrajinská protiofenzíva, která šokovala Putina a přetvořila válku – The Washington Post

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Evropa

Uvnitř ukrajinské protiofenzívy, která šokovala Putina a přetvořila válku

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Ukrajinský voják na vstupním kontrolním stanovišti do města Izjum v Charkovské oblasti 15. září (Wojciech Grzedzinski pro The Washington Post)



Poslouchat

27 min

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Ženatý článek



Podíl

CHARKIV, Ukrajina – Po týdnech bojů o útržky území na nejkrvavější frontě války byl 21letý ukrajinský velitel roty Oleh Ioni v srpnu spolu s tisíci dalších vojáků náhle povolán na neznámé místo setkání. Charkovská oblast.

Jste na telegramu? Přihlaste se k odběru našeho kanálu a získejte nejnovější aktualizace o válce Ruska na Ukrajině. →

Na jeho poslední pozici pronásledovala nelítostná ruská dělostřelecká palba jeho muže na každém kroku. Ale tady, v kousku vesnic, zemědělské půdy a potoků na severovýchodě Ukrajiny, bylo ticho hluboce alarmující. "Nejvíc mi vadilo to ticho," řekl Oleh. "Vypadalo to mimo. Jak by to mohlo být?"

Ještě znepokojivější byly rozkazy, které vydal jeho nadřízení: vydat se až 40 mil na nepřátelské území vysokou rychlostí v odvážné, přísně tajné protiofenzívě – přímo mezi Rusy okupovanou baštou Izyum a vlastním ruským regionem Belgorod posetým armádou. základny. Vypadalo to absurdně. "Nějaký druh pochybné operace," řekl Oleh.

Oleh, jednadvacetiletý ukrajinský velitel roty, který se zúčastnil zářijové charkovské protiofenzívy. (Serhiy Morgunov pro The Washington Post)

Ale po létě těžkých ruských ztrát a odmítnutí prezidenta Vladimira Putina přijmout posily byly jednotky Kremlu značně vyčerpány. Přesun jednotek na jih – k obraně dobytého regionálního hlavního města Cherson uprostřed řečí o velkém ukrajinském tlaku tam – nechal oblast Charkova odhalenou.

Byla to ohromující zranitelnost, kterou potvrdily ukrajinské průzkumné týmy a malé drony. A Kyjev by toho využil ke změně dynamiky války a dosáhl cíle ukrajinského prezidenta Volodymyra Zelenského překreslit mapu bojiště před zimou.

5 klíčových poznatků o tom, jak ukrajinská protiofenzíva přetvořila válku

Poté, co 24. února začala ruská invaze, ukrajinské jednotky přinutily Rusko k ústupu z Kyjeva smolným triumfem, který ukončil první fázi konfliktu. Rusko, kterému bylo znemožněno dobýt hlavní město, soustředilo svou moc na jih a východ a udeřilo do ukrajinských sil, dokud ze Spojených států a Evropy nedorazily nové zbraně delšího

doletu a nepomohly zastavit postup Moskvy. Ukrajina přežila, ale po půl roce války byla čtvrtina jejího území stále okupována a její armáda neprokázala, že by mohla zahájit ofenzívu, aby znovu získala podstatnou část území.

To se mělo změnit.

Začátkem září se ukrajinské síly převalily po stovkách čtverečních mil, porazily Rusy a překvapily samy sebe. Charkovská ofenzíva odhalila neschopnost podmaněných a nedostatečně vybavených ruských sil udržet území na rozsáhlé frontě. Šokovalo to Kreml a ukrajinským příznivcům dokázalo, že neplýtvají miliardami ve zbraních a ekonomické pomoci.

Ruské vojenské vozidlo a munice zanechané v Charkovské oblasti poté, co ukrajinské ozbrojené síly provedly překvapivou protiofenzívu. (Heidi Levine pro The Washington Post)

Putin byl nucen odvést statisíce mužů , čímž dal jasně najevo náklady na válku ruskému obyvatelstvu, které se izolovalo od „zvláštní vojenské operace svého vůdce“. Mobilizace vyvolala nepokoje, ale bylo příliš pozdě na to, aby zastavila šíření Ukrajiny na jih do Chersonu, kde po tvrdých bojích a značných ztrátách kyjevské síly v listopadu znovu dobyly jediné regionální hlavní město, kterého se Putin od začátku války zmocnil.

Tato rekonstrukce Charkovské a Chersonské protiofenzívy je založena na rozhovorech s více než 35 lidmi, včetně ukrajinských velitelů, úředníků v Kyjevě a bojových jednotek, jakož i vysokých amerických a evropských vojenských a politických představitelů.

Oblasti, které Ukrajina získala zpět prostřednictvím protiofenzívy

Oblasti ovládané Ruskem

BĚLORUSKO

RUSKO

Černihiv

Belgorod

Částky

Valuyki

Kyjev

Charkov

Izyum

Starobilsk

UKRAJINA

UKRAJINA

Balaklia

LUHANSK

Čerkasy

Slovjansk

Luhansk

Dnipro

Doněck

DONĚCK

Záporoží

Cherson

ZÁPORIZZHIA

Oblast držena

od ruštiny-

couval

separatistů

od roku 2014

Mariupol

Melitopol

Mykolajiv

MOL.

Cherson

Oděsa

RUSKO

Kerč

KRYM

Anektováno Ruskem

v roce 2014

ROM.

Sevastopol

Kontrolní oblasti k 27. prosinci

Zdroje: Institute for the Study of War, AEI's Critical Threats Project

LARIS KARKLIS / WASHINGTON POST

Vzniká příběh o tom, jak prohlubující se spolupráce s mocnostmi NATO, zejména se Spojenými státy, umožnila ukrajinským silám – podporovaným zbraněmi, zpravodajskými službami a radami –

chopit se iniciativy na bojišti, odhalit Putinovy nároky na anexi jako fantazii a vybudovat víru v doma i v zahraničí, že Rusko může být poraženo.

"Náš vztah se všemi našimi partnery se okamžitě změnil," řekl generálplukovník Oleksandr Syrskij, který velel charkovské ofenzívě. "To znamená, že viděli, že můžeme dosáhnout vítězství - a pomoc, kterou poskytovali, byla efektivně využita."

II

V posledních srpnových dnech se Syrskij setkal ve velké operační místnosti na východě Ukrajiny se svými hlavními pomocníky a klíčovými veliteli brigád. Před nimi byla 520 čtverečních stop 3D vytištěná terénní mapa části Charkovské oblasti okupované Ruskem.

Každý velitel prošel cestou plánovaného útoku své jednotky mezi replikami měst, kopců a řek, plnil své poslání a diskutoval o koordinaci, nepředvídaných situacích a nejhorších scénářích. Strážníci použili laserová ukazovátka, aby upozornila na problémová místa.

"Byla to pečlivá práce," řekl Syrsky.

Válka na Ukrajině zdecimovala kdysi obávanou ruskou brigádu

Přinejmenším od jara Syrskij považoval Charkovskou oblast a strategická města Balaklija a Izjum za zranitelná místa pro Rusy.

Za ruské okupace přežila žena Izyum mučení a znásilnění
4:32

Alla, 52, tvrdí, že během okupace Izyumu ji a jejího manžela 10 dní brutalizovaly ruské síly. (Video: Whitney Shefte, Jon Gerberg/The Washington Post)

Začal přemýšlet o tom, jak povede ofenzivu tím, že zajede hluboko do území ovládaného Rusy z neočekávané oblasti severně od obou měst, odřízne ruské síly od rezerv přes blízkou hranici a vystaví Balakliyu i Izyum riziku obklíčení.

Geografie a rozmístění ruských sil ho přesvědčily, že toho lze dosáhnout jediným rychlým úderem – ideálně tak rychlým, že se Rusko nebude schopno přeskupit.

Když loni v létě vyšel z ukrajinského generálního štábu rozkaz, aby velitelé přišli s možnými diverzními operacemi k odvedení ruských sil od obranu Chersonu, Syrskij věděl, co navrhne.

„Nepřítel... si myslel, že protože v Izyumu bylo vybudováno tolik sil a další byly rozmístěny nad ruskou hranicí v oblasti Belgorod, „musíte být blázen, abyste se pohnuli a pokusili se zasáhnout přímo uprostřed a rozdělit se. ti dva,“ řekl Syrsky. "Ale ta myšlenka tam byla."

Ukrajinský generálplukovník Oleksandr Syrskij, který velel charkovské protiofenzívě, řekl, že rychlost je kritická. "Všechno záleželo na prvním dni - jak daleko jsme mohli prorazit," řekl. (Anastasia Vlasova pro The Washington Post)

V raných fázích války Rusko přeměnilo Izjum na vojenskou pevnost a pohlíželo na město jako na základnu pro klešťové hnutí, které by obklopilo ukrajinské síly na východě. Na vrcholu příprav podle Syrského Rusko shromáždilo v Izjumu a okolních městech 24 praporových taktických skupin — asi 18 000 vojáků — spolu se zásobami zbraní a munice.

V srpnu, částečně díky podrobným zpravodajským informacím poskytnutým Spojenými státy, Syrsky viděl, že počet praporů v Izyumu klesl nejméně o polovinu, protože Rusko přemístilo své

nejzkušenější bojovníky do Chersonu.

"V historii válek bylo mnoho případů, kdy se útok na diverzní osu - tedy na vedlejší osu - změnil na hlavní osu," řekl Syrsky. "Vyhlídky byly všechny, protože... nepřítel absolutně nečekal, že zaútočíme přesně tam, kde jsme zasadili hlavní úder."

Syrskij spočítal, že Ukrajina si nemůže dovolit ztráty, které by přinesly přímé útoky na města. Místo toho plánoval překročit frontu, obklíčit populační centra a donutit nepřítele k ústupu.

Rychlost byla zásadní. Pokud by Rusové poslali zálohy zpoza hranice, velké množství ukrajinských vojáků by mohlo být odříznuto za nepřátelskými liniemi.

"Všechno záleželo na prvním dni - jak daleko jsme mohli prorazit," řekl Syrsky. "Čím dále jsme šli, tím méně mohli dělat, tím více by jejich jednotky byly pod psychologickým tlakem odříznuty a izolovány."

V srpnu Ukrajincům téměř došla munice ze sovětské éry, kterou používala většina jejich dělostřelectva. Západní spojenci spěchali s municí a systémy standardu NATO – ale nestačili.

Uvnitř monumentálního, stop-start úsilí o vyzbrojení Ukrajiny

V riskantním rozhodnutí Ukrajina přesunula některé z nejvzácnějších západních zbraňových systémů pryč z horkých míst na východní frontě. Každá útočící brigáda byla vyzbrojena nejméně osmi houfnicemi M777, uvedli velitelé. V některých případech M777 dorazily do táborů noc před začátkem útoku. Byly také přivezeny další drony, aby se zajistilo, že brigády budou moci přesně určit cíle a použít méně munice.

Ukrajínští vojáci v červenci vypálili z houfnice M777 na ruské jednotky v první linii v Charkovské oblasti. Začátkem září by Ukrajina zahájila překvapivou protiofenzívu. (Gleb Garanich/Reuters)

Generálmajor Andrij Malinovskij, velitel raketových sil a dělostřeleckého výcviku ukrajinské armády, se stále obával, že by síly mohly potřebovat více než 100 000 munice. Ukrajinci měli jen desetitisíce — na vleklou šlamastiku to nestačí. (Nakonec, řekl Malinovskij, použili asi 32 500 během pěti dnů).

Americké zpravodajské služby pomohly přidělovat munici přesným zaměřováním. Po mnoha měsících podle amerických a ukrajinských představitelů oba partneři vypracovali režim v reálném čase: Ukrajinci načrtli typy vysoce hodnotných cílů, které v oblasti hledali, a Spojené státy použijí své rozsáhlé geoprostorový zpravodajský aparát reagovat s přesnými umístěními.

Američané se však do plánování charkovské ofenzivy hluboce nepodíleli a podle amerických a ukrajinských představitelů se o ní dozvěděli poměrně pozdě.

Přes pokusy o utajení si Rusové nakonec uvědomili, že Ukrajinci něco chystají.

Díky ruské byrokracii se informace podle Syrského „nedostaly k nikomu nebo nebyly brány v úvahu“.

At the Pentagon, officials suspected that Russia's leadership didn't fully realize the vulnerabilities on the Kharkiv front because battlefield commanders were lying. Another hypothesis, a senior U.S. defense official said, was that Russia saw the onslaught coming but didn't have enough men to stop it.

The Ukrainians moved pontoon bridges around, hoping to trick the Russians into expecting a direct assault on Izyum, rather than a drive deep into territory some 30 miles northwest.

By mid-August, Syrsky was confident the plan would work — but he needed to sell it to Zelensky. He described the mission as a chance to liberate a large swath of territory with minimal resources and losses.

Zelensky, craving a big battlefield win, approved the attack.

Russia and Ukraine are fighting the first full-scale drone war

III

On Sept. 6, just past 3:30 a.m., Oleh's company of about 100 soldiers, part of the 25th Airborne Assault Brigade, began to advance in small columns of three infantry fighting vehicles each. For hours before they started to move, Ukrainian artillerymen had been pounding Russian positions with U.S.-made M270 multiple launch rocket systems.

Command posts. Ammunition depots. Fuel storage facilities. The firing was relentless. Across the front, Ukrainian military officials later said, Russian soldiers or their separatist proxies struggled to receive orders or coordinate with nearby forces as the rockets rained down. Some troops began to retreat.

“We broke through the front line, and the enemy started panicking,” Oleh said, speaking on the condition he be referred to by his first name because his relatives live in Russian-occupied territory. “They were panicking because we attacked all front-line positions at once — the entire front line itself was enormous — and everywhere there was a breakthrough.”

Liudmila Trykushenko and her husband were sleeping next to each other in their cellar to hide from the shelling happening in their hometown.
(Video: Whitney Shefte, Whitney Leaming/The Washington Post)

By the end of that first day, Oleh's company had advanced about 11 miles with little resistance, reaching the edge of Volokhiv Yar, a picturesque town in a ravine. Capturing this key junction would allow Ukrainian forces to block two major highways heading into Izyum and Balakliya.

That morning, Evhenii Andrushenko woke up to four Russian tanks parked in front of his home in Volokhiv Yar. Soldiers were sitting in a gazebo alongside his fence, he said. “They were sitting there drinking beer,” Andrushenko said. “And talking about where to run.”

Detail

Kyiv

Ukraine’s successful

Kharkiv counteroffensive

required two simultaneous

advances into Russian-

held areas:

Russian-controlled

area

Belgorod

RUSSIA

Toward Kupyansk

and points north

Toward Izyum

and points south

Vovchansk

Area recaptured

by Ukraine in Sept.

UKRAINE

Kharkiv

KHARKIV

Chuhuiv

Kupyansk

Andriivka

Volokhiv Yar

Sept. 6

Sept. 6

LUHANSK

Balakliya

Russian-held

areas

Donets R.

Kun'e

Svatove

Izyum

Sept. 12

Starobilsk

Korovii

Yar

20 MILES

Kreminna

Lyman

Barvinkove

Oct. 1

Slovyansk

Severodonetsk

Kramatorsk

Donets R.

DONETSK

Bakhmut

Popasna

Popasna

LUHANSK

Sources: Institute for the Study of War, AEI's Critical Threats Project

LARIS KARKLIS/THE WASHINGTON POST

Oleh and his troops moved into the town. They had accomplished their first objective. And just as quickly they moved on, racing southeast for several days, with relatively little resistance, into spaces abandoned by Russian forces.

Under the original battle plan, the company, by Day 7, was to take up a position on a ridge north of Izyum, some 40 miles from the offensive's starting point. But the day before, Oleh was summoned with other company commanders to a meeting. "Half the units in Izyum, maybe even the majority, are simply fleeing," their battalion commander said. "So, we're entering Izyum."

Oleh's company went first and dug in at the first Russian checkpoint in the city. Within minutes, a boxy Zhiguli sedan with flags and the painted letter "Z" — a symbol of the invaders — came speeding up the road filled with fighters.

If they were trying to flee, they were headed in the wrong direction.

"Come this way, my sweet," Oleh said.

A soldier blasted the car with a rocket-propelled grenade.

"Enemy eliminated," he said.

In the distance, the Ukrainian troops could see other Russian vehicles heading in the correct direction — out of the city.

"We expected that we would fulfill all the missions of the operation," Syrsky said. "But that there would be this kind of cascading collapse — I didn't expect that."

When Oleh's company entered central Izyum, having made it there without any losses, the troops were dumbfounded at what lay before them: Tanks in working order, ready to be driven. Abandoned artillery pieces, ready to be fired. Fuel tankers "filled up to the eyeballs." Tons of ammunition and light weapons.

The Russian troops had had everything they needed for a serious defense, Oleh thought, except the will to fight and, apparently, enough men. Even the elite Russian units left in the area bolted, realizing Moscow had no backup cavalry to send.

"When we entered Izyum, some kind of feeling arose, like the taste of victory," said the company's 36-year-old chief sergeant, Anton Chorny. "It seemed to everyone like the beginning of the end."

Oleh fired up his Starlink satellite internet and placed a call. Some 75 miles east of where he stood, his parents were living under occupation in the city of Starobilsk in the Luhansk region.

“What on earth are you guys up to over there?” his father asked. Russian forces in Starobilsk had just fled, his father said, and separatist fighters were now manning the checkpoints.

Oleh told him they had taken Izyum and chased the Russians out of hundreds of square miles of territory in a matter of days.

“Well done! Well done!” his father said.

“Don’t worry,” Oleh said. “Soon we’ll be in Starobilsk.”

He wasn’t fully kidding. Oleh, it seemed, could soon be going home.

IV

The rout in the Kharkiv region rocked Moscow.

Putin’s refusal for months to take the political risk of announcing a draft had had disastrous consequences.

Left with little choice, he declared what he called a “partial mobilization” to conscript up to 300,000 troops, his biggest and riskiest escalation since the start of the war. Hundreds of thousands of Russian men fled the country in a frenzy.

In a speech, Putin characterized the mobilization as a necessary step to fend off Western nations bent on destroying Russia. He also suggested he might use nuclear weapons.

Russia’s annexation puts world ‘two or three steps away’ from nuclear war

“This is not a bluff,” Putin said.

Putin sped up his annexation plans, declaring Ukraine’s Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions to be part of Russia despite lacking full control over them.

“I want the Kyiv authorities and their real masters in the West to hear me, so that they remember this,” Putin said in a speech. “People living in Luhansk and Donetsk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia are becoming our citizens. Forever.”

On Oct. 8, Putin also designated Gen. Sergei Surovikin the first sole commander to lead Russia’s war across the entire theater.

With a direct line to Surovikin, Putin began to receive a more unvarnished picture of the problems on the battlefield, according to two people familiar with the matter, who said that previously Putin had been given overly rosy assessments by his top defense officials.

The peril of his disconnect from reality could not be mistaken. Zelensky had arrived to stand in the center of Izyum.

V

After his company’s victory, Oleh’s soldiers spent about a week in Izyum in mid-September, relishing the thought that the war’s end was near. Then they headed southeast, crossing into the Donetsk region on orders to retake the city of Lyman.

Reality resurfaced along the way.

In a line of trees near the village of Korovii Yar, the company came under fire from three Russian tanks. Five men from Oleh’s company were killed, according to the chief sergeant. Twelve were wounded, including a squadron commander who led his soldiers for four hours after shrapnel ravaged his jaw. The Ukrainians ultimately took the village, Oleh said, but the racing advance had stalled to something tougher and slower.

Russia is fighting for land already in ruins

Gains in the direction of Lyman would be hard-fought.

Oleh was 13 years old in 2014 when war came to his native Luhansk region. The Kremlin fueled a separatist conflict, forcing Kyiv to fight for the predominantly Russian-speaking territory in the east. But even in an area that historically had Russian sympathies, a young Oleh was always sure of his stance.

“I’m not a herd, and I don’t have a shepherd,” he said. “I was born and raised in an independent country. I have my own opinion, which in Ukraine has a right to live and exist. I don’t know how it is in Russia.”

After ninth grade, Oleh left for a local military school, then enrolled at the Odessa Military Academy in the department of airborne assault forces. Three and a half years into his four-year degree, war broke out. The students were sent straight to the front. Oleh ended up back in Ukraine’s east, first as a platoon commander and later as a company commander, leading soldiers who in many cases were years older than he was.

After Korovii Yar, the company moved farther south, taking up a position outside Lyman. The Russians in the city were nearly surrounded, but unlike their compatriots in Izyum, they fought.

“There was so much enemy artillery fire — everything they had, all the artillery they had, the tanks, everything, was unloading right onto us, onto us, onto us,” Oleh said. The only route out of Lyman for the Russians was a road with little cover. Finally, one night, the Ukrainian company heard the rumble of a large column of vehicles and covered the road with artillery fire.

Lyman, too, had fallen.

In the days since, Oleh’s company has advanced 17 miles east, just past the border of the Luhansk region, where Russia is deploying drafted conscripts by the truckload onto the front line 36 miles from his hometown.

On east front with Ukrainian troops: Constant shelling, no heat or coffee

“It’s still quite a long ways to my city,” Oleh said. “But every day we get closer and closer. I can’t wait.”

VI

Kharkiv gave the Ukrainians a chance to push on an open door. Kherson presented a solid wall.

Over months of occupation, the Russians had dug trenches and built large defenses. The farmland of the steppe offered little natural cover for an attacking force, and a maze of irrigation canals as obstacles. Moscow had brought in its best troops.

“The minefields they set up there — they practically didn’t know themselves how many they set up. Everyone who came there would change them and add additional minefields,” said Maj. Gen. Andriy Kovalchuk, who was tasked with leading the Kherson counteroffensive. “We didn’t have the option to advance rapidly.”

To decide how to go about the operation, Ukrainian commanders arrived in Germany last July for a war-gaming session with their American and British counterparts.

At the time, the Ukrainians were considering a far broader counteroffensive across the entire southern front, including a drive to the coast in the Zaporizhzhia region that would sever Moscow’s coveted “land bridge” connecting mainland Russia with Crimea, which was illegally annexed in 2014.

In a room full of maps and spreadsheets, the Ukrainians ran their own “tabletop exercise,” describing the order of battle — what formations they would use, where the units would go and in what sequence — and the likely Russian response.

The American and British war-gamers ran their own simulations using the same inputs but different software and analysis. They couldn't get the operation to work.

Given the numbers of Ukrainian troops and available stockpiles of ammunition, the planners concluded that the Ukrainians would exhaust their combat power before achieving the offensive's objectives.

"This was them asking for our advice," said a senior U.S. defense official, who like others in this article spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive military planning. "And our advice was, 'Hey, guys, you're going to bite off more than you can chew. This isn't going to work out well.'"

Beyond the risk of running out of steam, a Zaporizhzhia offensive might have pushed Ukrainian forces into a pocket the Russians could surround with reinforcements sent along two axes, from Crimea and Russia.

"Our commanders thought the Ukrainians left pretty determined that they were going to do the whole thing anyway — just that there was a lot of pressure to do the whole thing," the defense official said.

The White House reiterated the U.S. military's analysis in talks with Zelensky's office.

National security adviser Jake Sullivan talked to the Ukrainian president's chief of staff, Andriy Yermak, about the plans for a broad southern counteroffensive, according to people familiar with the discussions.

The Ukrainians accepted the advice and undertook a narrower campaign focused on Kherson city, which sits on the west side of the Dnieper River, separated from Russian-held territory to the east.

“I give the Ukrainians a lot of credit,” the defense official said. “They allowed reality to move them toward a more limited set of objectives in Kherson. And they were nimble enough to exploit an opportunity in the north. That’s a lot.”

Kovalchuk set out to bisect the Russian-occupied area on the west side of the Dnieper and trap the Russian forces. “My task was not only to liberate the territory,” he said. “My task from the start was to occlude and destroy the force. That is, to not let them leave or exist.”

The objectives of the Kherson offensive were to bisect the Russian-occupied area west of the Dnieper River and trap the Kremlin forces there, and to get within artillery range of Kherson city and three key river crossings.

Toward Kherson city

and points south

Area reclaimed

by Ukraine by

Nov. 11 as

Russia withdraws.

Dudchany

Davydiv

Brid

Kyiv

Russian-controlled

area

Bruskynske

Detail

Snihurivka

Beryslav

Hydroelectric

dam

Nova

Kakhovka

Zelenyi

Hai

Antonovsky

railway bridge

Mykolaiv

Antonovsky

Bridge

Kherson

Northern

Crimean

Canal

Russian-

controlled

area

Skadovsk

15 MILES

Sources: Institute for the Study of War, AEI's Critical Threats Project

LARIS KARGLIS/THE WASHINGTON POST

Failing that, the goal was to force them to flee. The 25,000 Russian troops in that portion of Kherson, separated by the broad river from their supplies, had been placed in a highly exposed position. If enough military pressure was applied, Moscow would have no choice but to retreat, Kovalchuk said.

Russia had to arm and feed its forces via three crossings: the Antonovsky Bridge, the Antonovsky railway bridge and the Nova Kakhovka dam, part of a hydroelectric facility with a road running on top of it.

The two bridges were targeted with U.S.-supplied M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems — or HIMARS launchers, which have a range of 50 miles — and were quickly rendered impassable.

“There were moments when we turned off their supply lines completely, and they still managed to build crossings,” Kovalchuk said. “They managed to replenish ammunition. ... It was very difficult.”

Kovalchuk considered flooding the river. The Ukrainians, he said, even conducted a test strike with a HIMARS launcher on one of the floodgates at the Nova Kakhovka dam, making three holes in the metal to see if the Dnieper's water could be raised enough to stymie Russian crossings but not flood nearby villages.

The test was a success, Kovalchuk said, but the step remained a last resort. He held off.

VII

At the outset of the Kherson offensive, Ukrainian forces charged through Russia's first-line defenses. Then they met fierce resistance.

A 32-year-old company commander named Yurii in Ukraine's 35th Marine Brigade led his platoons in early September across a small river under fire, only to face a dug-in second line outside the village of Bruskynske, about 50 miles northeast of Kherson city. The Russians had been in the area for months, lining trenches with concrete and hiding tanks in deep ditches in the ground.

There, Yurii's men felt the full force of Russian aviation. Russian military aircraft dropped high-explosive FAB bombs on his unit, which initially didn't have any weaponry to defend itself or target the planes.

"This is a munition that leaves nothing behind," Yurii said. "That explosion, that wave — when it's 200 meters away, you feel it very strongly. It throws you back. ... When we had direct hits on the positions with FABs, there was nothing left of the people."

Ukrainian forces in the area were trying to push southward to bisect the Russian-occupied territory west of the Dnieper and get within artillery range of the Nova Kakhovka dam.

Ukrainian losses quickly mounted. With increasing numbers of armored vehicles destroyed or out of service, medics had to use pickup trucks to shuttle the wounded, often under fire from the Russians. Later, they used a Russian-made car.

"During the next evacuation, my combat medic was hit by shrapnel through the window directly into the car," Yurii said. "During those two weeks, there was not a single window left in the car. Everything was smashed by shrapnel. But still the evacuations took place."

By October, Ukraine had begun stabilizing the situation, and Yurii was dispatched to enter the nearby village of Davydiv Brid. There, he climbed a red metal structure, bursting with happiness, to record on

camera that the village had been liberated.

A strong wind gusted. “We solemnly hang a blue-yellow flag above Davydiv Brid,” he yelled into the gale. “Glory to Ukraine!”

VIII

Back in Kyiv, impatience was growing.

Kovalchuk was insisting it was just a matter of time before the Russians retreated — the leaves were about to fall off the trees, the river would freeze in winter, the Russian forces were running low on supplies.

But for Kyiv, Kovalchuk wasn’t moving fast enough. He was replaced by Brig. Gen. Oleksandr Tarnavsky, a deputy of Syrsky’s during the Kharkiv operation.

A senior Ukrainian government official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the matter publicly, said Kovalchuk “wasn’t getting the job done.”

But the change wasn’t publicly announced, the official said, so as not to provide Russia with any kind of propaganda victory. The Americans were informed.

“I think there were folks who were probably getting impatient with the movement in the south,” said a senior U.S. military official. “It was a really good start and then it just kind of stopped.”

Tarnavsky, the new commander, said he applied some of the principles he and Syrsky had used in Kharkiv, attacking where the Russians least expected it.

He said he singled out the territory between Mykolaiv and Kherson — flat farmland with few trees and obstructive concrete irrigation canals — as the place to mount the main offensive drive. “The calculation,” Tarnavsky said, “was the enemy wouldn’t think we would do it there.”

IX

Responsibility for that difficult stretch of front, northwest of Kherson, fell to Col. Vadym Sukharevsky, commander of the 59th Motorized Infantry Brigade.

His men had charged through Russia's front lines, overcoming losses, and were pushing against ferocious resistance to get close enough to strike the river crossings into Kherson with artillery. That fire would also make Russian resupply trips by pontoon barges nearly impossible. His forces were almost there. "It was literally a battle for every meter," Sukharevsky said.

Up against elite Russian air-assault units, Sukharevsky's less experienced troops were forced to engage in what he called battlefield "folk art."

They modified the batteries in off-the-shelf DJI Mavic drones so the copters could fly four times farther, up to 13 miles. They obtained an additive used to give natural gas its scent and launched the foul odor into enemy trenches. They accepted drones from cigarette smugglers and transformed them into self-detonating explosives.

"Our army is used to fighting with improvised means," Sukharevsky said.

One of his platoon commanders, Chief Sgt. Yevhen Ignatenko, the owner of a large Kherson grain-shipping business and a regional politician, explained how best to destroy his own barges, which Russia had requisitioned to ferry forces and supplies across the Dnieper.

Ignatenko drew on a lifetime of local knowledge — back roads, canals, pumping stations — to figure out how to advance through the difficult terrain. He also gathered information about the Russians' activities from a network of sources behind enemy lines.

On the night of Nov. 9, Sukharevsky said, the brigade closed in on Zelenyi Hai, a village that put Kherson within artillery range. The Ukrainians began striking the river, he said. But the Russians had begun retreating days earlier.

Sukharevsky said he credits Ukraine's victory partly to the artillery systems, guided munitions and long-range rocket launchers sent by the West, which eventually wore down a Russian force already low on ammunition and struggling with supply lines.

The pressure from Ukrainian troops forced the retreat, but they didn't manage to run down or destroy the fleeing Russians. Mines, in some cases laid a meter apart and three rows deep or tucked into thin strips on the roads, prevented the Ukrainians from giving chase.

"They didn't hold back," Sukharevsky said. "They mined with everything, even new means we had never heard of."

X

When Zelensky visited Izyum in mid-September, days after Ukraine's Kharkiv offensive, the officials with him were tense, even though he was still some 12 miles from the front line. A visit to Kherson, with Russian snipers just across the river, posed a much greater risk.

Zelensky, however, could not be kept away.

Tarnavsky stood beside Zelensky on Kherson's central square. "I was amazed at the people I saw," Tarnavsky said. "All of their faces, there was just joy on them."

Zelensky raised the flag over a liberated city for the second time in two months and described the moment as the "beginning of the end of the war."

Ignatenko, the regional politician and Kherson shipping magnate serving in the 59th Brigade, sent a drone up over the river and found one of his barges half-submerged near the Antonovsky Bridge, but

others were missing.

“We’ll find them,” Ignatenko said. “And if we don’t find them, we’ll build new ones. It’s okay. At least we will be a free country.”

Shane Harris in Washington and Mary Ilyushina in Riga, Latvia, contributed to this report.