

Ilmari Kähkö

“Slava Ukraini!”

**Strategy and the Spirit of
Ukrainian Resistance,
2014–2023**

HUP HELSINKI
UNIVERSITY
PRESS

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Итоги были благополучно подведены вчера. Сегодня – день воспоминаний.

Чтобы понять, что творится в душе у человека, пришедшего с войны, нужно в первую очередь попытаться понять, что же такое война? Оксюморон заключается в том, что война – это такой тесносплетённый клубок противоречий, помноженный на особенности личностного восприятия и уникального опыта, что дать какое-либо чёткое определение для меня лично не представляется возможным. Война у каждого тупо своя. Общие – только противоречия. Война это грязь и смерть, но одновременно она может быть самым чистым и простым (мало что в жизни может быть настолько черно-белым), что было в жизни у человека. Война – это жёсткость и жестокость, но в то же время – война это любовь (от причин, побудивших воевать до готовности отдать жизнь за вчера еще малознакомого сослуживца). Война – это экшн, и война это скука (в видео не попал момент, где в финале вынужденной недельной лежки на базе страус был пойман и одет в бронжилет). Война – это смех под обстрелом и слёзы здорового мужика над детскими рисунками, что привезли волонтёры. Война – это радость пережитой ночи и неопишная горечь утраты.

За рамками сухих энциклопедических определений в мирной жизни, я откровенно отчаялся в попытках увидеть понимание в глазах даже самых близких и родных. Не потому, что у меня скудный словарный запас или недостаточно желания и энергии, и уж точно не по причине чёрствости и недостатка внимания моих близких. Просто это тот водораздел, что на всю оставшуюся жизнь встал стеной между людьми, которые там не были, и теми, неуловимо-своими, которые были.

Для первых – это не причина относиться к последним, как к прокажённным и ждать, что они укусят. Для последних – это не повод возносить себя на пьедестал и считать, что весь мир им теперь обязан. Для нас для всех – это экзамен на терпимость, уважение и человечность. При этом в ситуации не должно быть трагедии и драмы. Трагедия – это безысходность гибели, а жизнь – это почти всегда возможность, пусть иногда и призрачная, но всё-таки возможность быть счастливым.

Ваш Буржуй

To understand what is happening in the soul of a person who came from the war, you must first try to understand what war is. War is such an intertwined jumble of contradictions, exaggerated by one's personal perceptions and unique experiences, that it is borderline impossible for me to come up with an exact definition. Everyone's war is their own. The only things in common are the contradictions. War is dirt and death, but at the same time it can be the purest and simplest thing (there are not many that can be so black and white) in a person's life. War is cruelty and malice. But, at the same time, war is love: beginning with the reasons that prompted you to go fight to the readiness to give your life for a brother in arms you met literally yesterday. War is action and war is boredom (at some point after a week without missions we chased down an ostrich that was a remnant of a local mini-zoo and put an armor vest on it – purely out of safety concerns, of course). War is laughter under shelling and tears of a grown man over children's drawings brought by volunteers. War is the joy of a night you managed to live through and the indescribable bitterness of losing a friend.

Beyond the bounds of dry encyclopedic definitions in a peaceful life, I frankly despaired when trying to see the understanding in the eyes of even my closest relatives. Not because I have a poor vocabulary, or lack desire and energy, and certainly not because of thick skin and lack of attention from my loved ones. War is a Rubicon that for the rest of one's life becomes a wall between the people who were not there, and those who were. For the former, this is not a reason for treating the latter as lepers and waiting for them to bite. For the latter, this is not a reason to raise oneself on a pedestal and consider that the entire world now owes them something.

For all of us, this is a test of tolerance, respect, and humanness. At the same time, the disparity should not be a source of tragedy or drama. Tragedy is the hopelessness of death, while life is almost always a possibility, albeit sometimes an illusory one, but still – the possibility of being happy.

Yours,
Burzhua

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Many of the arguments in this volume have been discussed with my Ukrainian interlocutors over the years. While I expect you to disagree with much between these covers, rest assured that it is ultimately our interactions that I value most. This volume is dedicated to you, as well as to everyone who has suffered because of this long war. I hope it will be remembered as the war that ends all wars – but I may be overly optimistic here. Throughout this process of researching and writing, my main motivation has been

that through better understanding, we can do better in the future – which I hope equals peaceful times. This we owe to the generations to come.

Introduction

Around 5 a.m. Kyiv¹ time on Thursday, February 24, 2022, the Russian president Vladimir Putin announced in a pre-recorded message the beginning of a “special military operation ... to protect people who, for eight years now, have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kiev regime ... [and] to demilitarise and denazify Ukraine” (President of Russia 2022). The large-scale Russian invasion followed eight years of low-intensity war in Donbas – a portmanteau formed from Donetsk Basin, which colloquially refers to the Donetsk and Luhansk *oblasts* (regions) of Ukraine – and the massing of Russian troops on Ukraine’s borders since April 2021 that accompanied the ultimately unmet demands of a new European security architecture favorable to Russia. Within days, the Russian invasion faltered. The Russian strategy had assumed limited if any significant Ukrainian resistance. This faulty assumption resulted in devastating and long-lasting consequences.

“Slava Ukraini!”: Strategy and the Spirit of Ukrainian Resistance 2014–2023 tells the story of the development of Ukrainian resistance through eyes of the volunteers who mobilized to fight separatism and Russian influence in the spring of 2014. The volunteers emerged in the aftermath of the February 2014 Maidan Revolution that toppled the regime of the pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich and cemented Ukraine’s new trajectory toward the European Union and NATO. The post-revolutionary context was

1 Ukrainian spellings are used throughout this volume, except when other spellings appear in direct citations.

ambiguous, characterized by a crisis of political legitimacy, as well as an overall weakness of the Ukrainian state. Volunteer battalions largely self-mobilized to prevent the breakdown of Ukrainian territorial sovereignty after Russia occupied and annexed the Crimean Peninsula and began to stoke separatism in Ukraine's eastern regions. For many volunteers, the war was also necessary to protect the gains of the revolution and assure a better future. Ultimately, it was the volunteers' Spirit of 2014 which planted the seed of the Ukrainian resistance that only grew during the following eight years, and which the Russian war planners overlooked. The large-scale Russian invasion caused this spirit to flare up anew, with a stronger flame and on a national scale.

"Slava Ukraini!" combines original fieldwork with sociological and strategic theory to present an analysis of the dynamics of the war that preceded Putin's large-scale invasion of Ukraine. In the early stages of the war in Donbas, it was the volunteers that formed the main force available to counter separatism in eastern Ukraine. Yet, especially for them, the war simply never was: there was no declaration of war, nor did large sections of Ukrainian society mobilize to join it. To make matters worse, in an ambiguous political situation, the Ukrainian state security forces became largely inactive. While those police officers who stayed in service felt they could do little against encroaching separatism, the military too found itself outside its comfort zone and stupefied in the absence of a declaration of war and without a symmetrical uniformed opponent. Conceptual contradictions and legal quandaries contributed to the opacity of the situation, which was already affected by the new rulers' lack of a counterstrategy, limited capacity to govern, and contested political legitimacy. This ambiguous context set the strategic parameters in Ukraine and permitted the rise of the volunteer battalions.

Ultimately, this book argues that what can be called the volunteers' Spirit of 2014 forms a precursor to a broader societal mobilization to resist the Russian invasion in 2022. In this sense especially the Russian but also the Western failure to understand how Ukrainian society had been affected by the Maidan Revolution

and the war in Donbas resulted in a great intelligence failure with deadly consequences.

The Argument

This volume employs the case of the Ukrainian volunteer battalions to examine how contemporary non-state actors deal with – and contribute to – dilemmas connected to strategy. Arising from the loss of political legitimacy that led to the toppling of the Yanukovich regime in February 2014, the violent revolution contributed to uncertainty and a vacuum of political authority especially in southern and eastern Ukraine. This vacuum was soon filled by Russian-supported separatists. With the Ukrainian state and its security forces paralyzed, volunteers became a stopgap measure to defend Ukrainian territorial sovereignty.

The battalions the volunteers formed offer a modern-day European case where it became an urgent need to create, control, and use force. These three processes proceeded in an almost chronological sequence during 2014. This aids in their analysis and allows investigation of the evolution of strategy in the war in Donbas. This evolution did not merely concern adaptation and optimization of means and ways. More fundamentally, the evolution of strategy in the war in Donbas concerned the shifting power relationship between the volunteers and the state. By the time Russia occupied Crimea and had concentrated close to 40,000 troops across Ukraine's borders, Ukraine could muster no more than 5,000 combat-ready soldiers (Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council 2016). Due to its weakness in the early days of the war the state was a passenger, the volunteers the drivers.

The case of the Ukrainian volunteer battalions also demands a widening of the scope of strategic theory to include militia strategy. The volunteer battalions must be recognized as not merely a militia force but as political actors who influenced the dynamics of the war in Donbas. This endeavor in turn is not possible without a contextualized empirical description constructed from

the narratives of those who participated in this war. The empirical contribution of this book thus comes in the form of a careful study of the roles played by the volunteer battalions in the war in Ukraine from the spring of 2014 until October 2023.

Previous reviews illustrate that much of the past literature on the war in Donbas has tended to emphasize the external Russian intervention or domestic Ukrainian dynamics (Hauter 2021, 11–12; Sæther 2023). Even when Ukrainian motivations have been considered, they have often been described as either pro-Western or pro-Russian. Reminiscent of the Cold War, this framing largely relegates Ukraine to a battlefield where larger issues of international magnitude are settled through proxies (Dyczok 2016, 191–92; Matsuzato 2017, 177). This volume follows the example of scholars like Andrew Wilson (2016) and Serhy Yekelchuk (2020), and likewise seeks to balance domestic and external factors in analysis.

This volume’s reliance on strategy as a theoretical framework applied to the volunteer battalions offers new insights about the dynamics of the war. As discussed further in [Chapter 1](#), investigating non-state actor strategy necessitates departing from Ukrainian experiences, voices, and realities – but always interpreting them in a broader international context. While sympathetic to Ukrainians, the intention has nevertheless not been to uncritically repeat Ukrainian views. In fact, it is almost inevitable that this account of these highly polarized and politicized events will leave some of those involved unhappy – not least because as the opening quote from Putin illustrates, they continue to play a role in a situation where life is literally at stake.

This volume also pays attention to the sociological consequences of the volunteer battalions. Many Ukrainian volunteers, policymakers, and international observers alike were confused by the discrepancies between expectations and the reality of the war in Ukraine before the large-scale Russian invasion in 2022. This confusion gave rise to widespread views of a new kind of “hybrid” war that appeared to be a poor fit for our existing conceptual categories of war. In this situation where previous understand-

ings and definitions of war could not contain the phenomenon, “hybrid” war offered a way to expand a concept now viewed too narrowly (Echevarria 2016). Others have emphasized the political rather than the analytical value of this prefix to war (Fridman 2018; Galeotti 2019; Renz 2016). One thing was certain. If anything, the limited nature of this war made it an uncomfortable one (Freedman 2019; Honig 2017a): the limited war in Donbas appeared to suggest political apathy as the fighting did not result in broad mobilization against separatism. More concretely, limitations affected Ukrainian strategy by making it more difficult to prescribe how the war could be won.

Some of the initial confusion in 2014 can be explained by surprise. Few had expected Yanukovich to flee Ukraine, and Russia to occupy and annex the Crimean Peninsula in quick succession. Even the political vacuum that contributed to the rise of separatism and the passivity of the Ukrainian security forces was unexpected. The ambiguity of the situation was not helped by the absence of a declaration of war. To tackle separatism in eastern Ukraine, the Ukrainian interim government launched the anti-terrorist operation (ATO) led by the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU). The ATO gave the military a limited mandate and, as a consequence, almost immediately foundered as separatists began to disarm the Ukrainian security forces sent to restore order. Volunteers then stepped up to perform what even they largely took to be state functions.

Many volunteers initially believed that they had little choice but to mobilize for war. When the separatism of the “Russian spring” began in eastern Ukraine, the main threat was perceived to come, as in the Crimean Peninsula, from the same ambiguous “polite little green men” – Russian soldiers without insignia. Seeking to fill the vacuum of political authority, Ukrainian self-professed “patriots” rose as a counterinsurgent force of “little black men.”

Some clarification of terms is in order. Technically, most of the initial fighters on both sides were volunteers, whether from Ukraine, Russia, or elsewhere. As used here, the term “volunteer” refers to those who were not mobilized to war by the Ukrainian

state, but who nevertheless opposed separatists. The military volunteers in volunteer battalions did so through using force, while “civilian” volunteers helped them with logistics and other material and non-material support. The term “separatist” in turn is used to describe volunteers on the separatist side. The word “patriot” suggests that all volunteers were motivated by ideas of Ukrainian nationalism, which also explains why many Ukrainian politicians especially like the term. While many volunteers no doubt were patriots, there were other reasons beyond nationalism for joining up, not immediately connected to the ways the war has since been framed.

Volunteer Battalions and Strategy

The ambiguous position of the volunteer battalions derives from the difficulty to place them in the clear-cut dichotomous categories of public and private, state and society, or civilian and military. The volunteers were armed but of the people, rather than of the state and its military. Falling between existing categories, an investigation of the volunteer battalions provides a valuable opportunity to reconsider our existing theories not only of the concept and conduct of war but also of some important sociological assumptions, for instance about state–society relationships during times of war (Levi 1997).

Volunteer battalions emerged in the aftermath of the Maidan Revolution and the Russian occupation of the Crimean Peninsula largely because of state weakness. The self-defense units formed at the Maidan were estimated to include up to 12,000 members. Many of them subsequently joined the 40 or so volunteer battalions. By April 2014, when the Kyiv government announced its ATO against the Russian-supported separatists in Donbas, volunteer battalions had attracted around 5,000 fighters. By early 2015 the number had swelled to between 10,000 and 30,000. Regardless of the exact figure, this constituted a significant proportion of the estimated 50,000 soldiers who formed the combined Ukrainian forces deployed to the war in Donbas (Aaliyev 2016; Stasyuk

2018). Perhaps more remarkable was that, by June 2015, the vast majority of the volunteer battalions had become subordinated by various state authorities. They nevertheless continued to influence Ukrainian society, politics, and warfare – and in 2022 were lauded to have saved Ukraine anew after they mobilized and stopped the Russian invasion (Marson 2022).

Comparable non-state actors have emerged during national emergencies caused by interstate war. The Paris Commune that followed the defeat of the French army in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71 serves as one historical example of national mobilization against foreign invaders. More typically, non-state actors have emerged because of internal unrest that causes significant weakening or breakdown of political authority and state monopoly of violence. Paramilitary violence was, for instance, used to combat communism, legitimize political projects, maintain domestic order, and expand state territory in the tumultuous aftermath of the First World War (Gerwarth and Horne 2012). More recent cases can be found in several wars in various African and Middle Eastern countries and Yugoslavia.

Despite their prevalence in wars, non-state actors have often been understood as radically different from state forces (Biddle 2021), and from the perspective of strategy typically as auxiliary forces instead of strategic actors. The volunteer battalions demonstrate how the narrow scope of strategic theory has often led to assumptions that take too much for granted. Inquiry into strategy has tended to concern Western states, and typically greater powers (Ångström and Widen 2015, 3; Duyvesteyn and Worrall 2017). Criticism of these biases is not new. The Western bias has been highlighted by the likes of Tarak Barkawi (2016), who sought to broaden the narrow discussion to a more global one. For Martin van Creveld the assumption of an inseparable link between state and war formed the core problem for understanding contemporary war. The changed circumstances, where the majority of wars were fought by non-state actors, led him to call for ideas about war to be updated (Van Creveld 1991, 92).

The main problem with the narrow scope of strategic theory is the way strategy has often been conceptualized as little more than the use of force. This emphasis on violence can be traced to Carl von Clausewitz's famous 19th-century definition of war as "an act of violence intended to compel our opponent to fulfil our will" (Clausewitz 2004, 1). Critical of the narrow focus of past studies of war that had focused on "a finer kind of mechanical art" of creating and moving material force (Clausewitz 2004, 72), Clausewitz highlighted the use of force as the central characteristic of war. Following Clausewitz, strategy is still by and large understood to concern the use of force for political ends, or the relationship between ends, ways, and means in a dynamic context characterized by uncertainty and interaction with a living opponent. While Clausewitz's view was that "strategy ... takes things as it finds them," he hastened to add that this concerned "European states" and that strategy "observes where very different conditions have a notable influence on War" (Clausewitz 2004, 86). This latter addition can be taken as an encouragement to investigate non-state actors like the volunteer battalions, and not simply because they constituted central political and strategic actors during the initial stages of the war in Donbas.

This volume demonstrates how strategic theory must consider the three inherently political processes of creation, control, and use of force through the case of the Ukrainian volunteer battalions. This framework is subsequently applied in the February 2022 large-scale invasion by Russia, which its leaders called a "special military operation." Curiously, it was the Russian forces that struggled with many of the issues Ukrainians faced in 2014–15. This suggests the lasting importance of socio-political factors for military performance, but equally the success of the reforms the Ukrainian armed forces have undergone (with and without Western assistance) since 2014.

The War in Donbas

As the Russian military planners' faulty assumptions in 2022 and the struggles of the Ukrainian resistance since 2014 concretely illustrate, the issues investigated in this volume are not mere theoretical abstractions, but real problems that the actors involved had to deal with. One particular example should suffice here. While the Ukrainian military and political elites may have had little choice but to resort to the volunteer battalions in the spring of 2014, they were wary of their potential to upset the newly established but fragile post-revolutionary status quo. Many volunteers had already helped to topple one government, and in the spring of 2014 began to fight the war with a great degree of autonomy (Bukkvoll 2019). While the weakness of the Ukrainian state initially made the new elites dependent on the volunteer battalions, these elites soon realized the need to control these forces. This required strategy with both an internal and external dimension: because the volunteers posed a potential threat to the elites, they had to be dealt with as domestic political actors, and potentially competing ones. At the same time, controlling the volunteer battalions was a prerequisite for executing strategy against the ever more openly Russian-supported separatism (Käihkö 2018a). Even though ambiguity served a strategic purpose and was in any case unavoidable in the short term, the resulting uncertainty raised questions over whether the volunteer battalions were worth the risk they posed. Control over force was ultimately achieved by integrating the volunteer battalions with the very security structures they threatened. It was this control that enabled the evolution of strategy in the sense that the state replaced the volunteers as the highest authority, and representative of Ukraine (see Levi 1997). Unlike many of the volunteers who reveled in an exceptional situation, the post-revolutionary political and military authorities sought to stabilize and hence normalize the ambiguous political and military situation.

Despite all the ambiguity involved, it is remarkable how the volunteer battalions nevertheless subscribed to many traditional

conventions of war. That the volunteers sought to replicate what they perceived as traditional state functions is clear from their organization alone. The volunteers mobilized in what essentially were traditional military formations – regiments, battalions, companies, platoons, and squads – and searched for arms and uniforms that identified them as combatants. Of course, the ambiguity of the situation had profound influence on the volunteers. If not for this ambiguity and the weakness of the state, the volunteers would have mobilized through existing institutions instead of forming their own formations. The ambiguity came to permeate everything in the war of the volunteers. For instance, was the conflict an internal affair that required creation and maintenance of domestic order, or a defense against external enemies? Replication of state functions also allowed the volunteers a degree of legitimacy. In the end it was escalating violence and political polarization which caused the ambiguities to fade.

Was the war truly novel in the way both many Ukrainian and outside observers believed? All sides largely followed the same conventions of war. This resulted in a rather conventional form of warfare. While the volunteers had to initially deal with urgent but common problems like finding enemy sympathizers among civilian populations, the extent to which these non-state actors were influenced by transnational norms of conventional warfare is remarkable. The war gradually conventionalized as regular state armed forces increasingly asserted control over force, first on the Ukrainian and then on the separatist side. The resulting centralization allowed the coordination of larger forces and the use of heavier equipment – which in turn caused front lines to emerge and made forces all the more dependent on the states which controlled supply. By then the fighting concentrated on the rather traditional military task of controlling territory (Freedman 2019).

The war in Donbas culminated in two main battles, Ilovaisk in August 2014 and Debaltseve in January–February 2015. In both cases the intervention of Russian regulars led to the defeat of the combined Ukrainian forces and major fighting was halted by ceasefire agreements signed in Minsk, the Belarusian capital.

While heavy weapons were withdrawn from the front lines, the abstruse ATO-short-of-war continued. It did not take long before the reduced intensity of the war made it appear increasingly distant for those away from the front lines. For many in Kyiv and elsewhere, the only reminders were the funerals, which continued to be held for the gradually mounting casualties. In time most Ukrainians learned to live with the low-intensity war in the east.

With the war fading from public view, combatants who returned from the fight against Russia were incredulous that, for example, Russian banks continued to operate in Ukrainian cities. The Ukrainian state even continued to honor its pre-war agreements to sell military components to its opponent. After separatists secured their hold in Donbas following the battle of Debaltseve, they financed the war partly by exporting coal to Russia, from where it was sold to Ukrainian industries located in areas controlled by the very government fighting the separatists. Pensioners staying in the occupied territories continued to travel to government-controlled territory to collect pensions. All this made the combatants increasingly experience the war they fought as a “parallel reality” and a *Sitzkrieg* (phony war). In addition to this confusion, the volunteers also faced a legal crisis: would they be considered heroes or murderers for participating in a war that never was? Ultimately, this volume is about the volunteers who worried about the answer to this question, the implications such non-state actors pose for broader strategic theory, and how all this can help us understand the Russian invasion launched on February 24, 2022, and other wars, big and small.

Structure and Contents of the Volume

Chapters [1–3](#) set the theoretical and methodological stage, and introduce three of the main informants to the reader. The remaining chapters offer a comprehensive description of the rise, fall, and long-term influence of the volunteer battalions, concentrating on issues of strategy – here divided into the separate but interconnected processes of creation, control, and use of force in the war in

Donbas. This focus on the details is important in order to capture the context, always necessary for understanding any given conflict. [Chapter 7](#) offers an investigation of the Russian invasion that started in 2022, viewed through the analytical framework applied to the volunteer battalions in the preceding chapters.

[Chapter 1](#) presents the methods used in this study. To understand the war in Donbas and especially the largely undocumented role the volunteer battalions played in it, it is necessary to go directly to those who fought it. Conflict ethnography forms the overall methodological approach of this study. This chapter is structured around three factors present in all wars, and which inevitably influence even their study – violence, polarization, and instrumentality. Writing about any conflict in a politically nuanced manner is a difficult undertaking. Writing about an ongoing conflict where information is widely perceived as another contested arena poses even greater methodological predicaments. While ethnography offers much potential for furthering our understanding of war, it can also exacerbate some of the inherent methodological dilemmas that arise from the study of war. The chapter concludes with a short discussion on “chatnography”, or how digital methods contributed to this endeavor.

[Chapter 2](#) introduces some of the main informants, and through them the reformatory Spirit of 2014 and the relationship between citizenship and soldiering, the way the war in Donbas was gendered, and finally the plethora of motivations that made people and especially foreigners volunteer to fight in Ukraine. Each of these thematic issues offer avenues for future research.

[Chapter 3](#) initially attempts to take the reader to the grassroots protests that began in November 2013 at Maidan Nezalezhnosti, or Independence Square, in Kyiv. While the reasons for the conflict in Ukraine are deeply rooted, it was the Maidan protest that toppled the Yanukovich regime in February 2014. And while the revolution was successful, its violence contributed to polarization, uncertainty, and fear across the country. For many volunteers who participated in the revolution, the war that followed was merely the continuation of the same struggle. This alone makes it impos-

sible to understand the war in Ukraine without understanding the events that preceded it. The rest of the chapter introduces the war that followed the Maidan Revolution: what would become of Ukraine politically, and how would the revolution influence the Ukrainian state and society? These anxieties were immediately magnified with the Russian invasion and annexation of Crimea, and the rise of separatism in the east. While the occupation of Crimea was a grave violation of both Ukrainian sovereignty and international law, the separatism in the east appeared to threaten Ukraine's existence. Yet part of this anxiety was caused by the fact that the Ukrainian state was not prepared for the war. In fact, it could be argued that following Ukrainian independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, it was only in 2014 that Ukrainian statehood first became seriously tested. The Ukrainian state was not up to the task. This weakness and the overall ambiguity of the situation encouraged – if not necessitated – the mobilization of the volunteer battalions and set parameters for strategy in the ensuing war. The volunteers' ambiguous status nevertheless threatened the existing power structures in a war that did not correspond to expectations about war. The new government in Kyiv faced a dilemma: it could either refrain from fighting and lose at best a significant part of its territory and at worst everything, or rely on the volunteer battalions. With every day passing, the volunteers in turn found the state incapacity more bewildering. They did not wait for a green light from the government but sprang into action on their own.

The following three chapters focus on what followed, or strategy. Strategy is colloquially understood to concern the relationship among ends, ways, and means, directed against a living opponent. The means need to be formed and controlled before they can be used in appropriate ways to achieve the desired ends – while other wills are trying to prevent this. Thus, strategy is fundamentally about the creation, control, and use of force. While these processes form the core of all strategy everywhere, after the initial establishment of structure the three processes develop in close interaction with each other. In contrast, the Ukrainian vol-

unteer battalions offer a case where these three processes initially proceeded in an almost chronological sequence. This allows for zooming in and investigating the evolution of each of the three processes in turn.

Creation ([Chapter 4](#)), control ([Chapter 5](#)), and use ([Chapter 6](#)) of force receive their own chapters, which proceed in a somewhat chronological manner. These chapters narrate the remarkable rise of the volunteer battalions before their fall due to enemy action, changing dynamics of war, and state attempts to control them. [Chapter 6](#) on the use of force also offers a chronology of the war until 2022 and analyzes the role the volunteer battalions played in it.

[Chapter 7](#) applies the analytical framework used in the previous three chapters to the first 19 months that followed the large-scale Russian invasion in February 2022. The framework surprisingly reveals that Russia struggled with many of the same issues Ukrainians had encountered earlier in the war in Donbas and managed to solve with military reforms. And while the war is still ongoing at the time of writing, the resistance encountered by Russia suggests the endurance of the Ukrainian Spirit of 2014.

The [conclusion](#) sums up the argument about the implications of the volunteer battalions for strategic theory, and then their sociological Spirit of 2014, which directly contributed to the resistance Russia met with during its invasion in 2022. While the interaction inherent in strategy affected each of the processes of creating, controlling, and using force, this influence soon became stronger. By the end of 2014, Russia manipulated these processes, not least by escalating the conflict to a level that required the kind of heavy equipment only possessed by the military. By then the three processes had become intimately related to each other. While this increased complexity, it also reduced uncertainty. In Ukraine the volunteer battalions were legalized and formalized under state control, while the conventionalization of war established more regular operational patterns. While volunteers ultimately received special status from the state as the war stabilized following the Minsk agreements, many volunteers felt they did

not fit in the state structures. This led to their marginalization as combatants, but also raised new problems as they struggled to find meaning outside war.

The Russian invasion changed all this. During the eight years following 2014, the small scale of the war in Donbas affected Ukraine and Ukrainians. The large-scale invasion of 2022, however, immediately caused much wider effects, both in terms of sociological consequences and fatalities. This time the spirit of Ukrainian resistance was not limited to a few individuals but flamed on a national scale. Each member of the volunteer battalions interviewed for this book went back to the front lines. Not all of them would return.

CHAPTER 1

Ethnography and the War in Ukraine

One aim of this investigation is to address the criticism that insufficient attention has been given to Ukrainian voices when it comes to the war in Donbas (Wilson 2015b; Kuzio 2018). There are two reasons this study relies on ethnographic methods. First, there is a congruence between the ethnographic “thick description” (Geertz 1973) and the view of strategy as “a story about power told in the future tense from the perspective of a leading character” (Freedman 2013, 608) to the extent that it is difficult to see how the latter could exist without the former. Secondly, because limited previous research and few available written sources exist about the volunteers – the leading characters in this volume – the only way to achieve a thick description of the battalions they formed was to listen to the voices of the people involved.

Like all research, this study faced unique methodological quandaries. How should I go about studying events that have already passed, but which continue to exert a great influence on the people who participated in them? Why would the volunteers speak to me about the grave subject matter of armed conflict, especially given the legal premise of some of their actions remains ambiguous? Is it legitimate to call my study ethnographic when I did not participate or directly observe the events investigated, but am instead basing it on the representations of my informants? Considering the politicization and violence inherent in armed conflict, how should I deal with complex research ethics?

This chapter engages these vital questions and attempts to ensure transparency concerning evidence for the arguments in this book so that readers may judge the results. Transparency in

turn requires reflexivity, or discussing how my persona and personal choices influenced the research (Davies 2002). I also wish to emphasize that this work is not the final word on the subjects it discusses, some of which are still developing. This caveat has to do with a more long-term attempt to develop a methodology useful for the study of armed conflict and other politicized and sensitive topics that pose significant methodological challenges. Considering that ethnography has historically punched far below its weight in the study of especially interstate war (Käihkö 2022; Lutz 1999), this kind of methodological discussion appears much overdue.

This chapter begins by providing an overall account of how I conducted my research. Thereafter, it focuses in on how the nature of war affects research methodology. Three issues permeate not only conflicts but also their study: violence, polarization, and instrumentality. The rest of this chapter is structured around these issues, with each discussed in sections of their own. The concluding final section focuses on “chatnography,” my term for the online component of my broader conflict ethnographic approach that focused on the Ukrainians’ use of social media and instant messaging apps (Käihkö 2020a). This concluding section exemplifies how violence, polarization, and instrumentality saturated even the online dimension of my investigation.

Entering the Fray

I first heard of the conflict in Ukraine on February 21, 2014. This was the day after the sniper attacks in Kyiv, which I was able to watch on YouTube. The one-and-a-half-minute video from Euronews portrayed a scene from what appeared an urban battleground. Shots can be heard in the background as a small group of protestors, clad in makeshift armor and gripping thin metal shields, try to hold their ground against an unseen opponent. Protestors fall, apparently hit by bullets. One is hit in the thigh. Bodies of comrades are carried and dragged back, protected by protestors whose thin metal shields would not guard them against bullets. Then a protestor hiding behind a shield collapses, sending

what looks like a Soviet-era helmet rolling on the ground. As the name of the post summarized, “Brutal video shows all-out street war in Kiev, death toll rises in fresh clashes” (Euronews 2014).

On watching the carnage, my first instinct was to book a flight to Kyiv. In the end, I postponed the trip because of my ongoing PhD research that focused on war in West Africa. My first contact with the Ukrainian volunteer battalions nevertheless took place later in 2014 when I encountered online crowdsourcing efforts to help them in the war. I was immediately fascinated with how non-state actors became so crucial in the first major war of the 21st century in Europe.

To my surprise, by the time this project began in mid-2016 little research had been published on volunteer battalions (Kara-*giannis* 2016; *Malyarenko and Galbreath* 2016; *Puglisi* 2015b). The best – and probably the only – way to study the phenomenon was therefore through direct engagement with volunteers. The firsthand evidence behind my arguments comes from around 100 interviewees, collected predominantly during 117 days in Ukraine during 11 trips between May 2017 and January 2020. I conducted additional interviews in Sweden and the United States, as well as online, with Ukrainians and others with knowledge of Ukraine and the war. The interviewees include academics, civil society activists, civilian volunteers, foreign diplomats, current and former government employees, journalists, members of parliament, students, and internally displaced persons from Donbas. Those interviewed outside Ukraine include a top-level Ukrainian diplomat at the time of the Maidan Revolution, Maidan activists, academics, and several civilian and two volunteer battalion fighters. Following my emphasis on the importance of relationships, I met most of them more than once. I have communicated with many on a regular basis since I first encountered them in 2017. To allow participants to speak freely and to protect them from harm, I promised all of them anonymity.

At the center of this study stand 28 members (4 female, the rest male) of the volunteer battalions, whom I discuss in the coming chapters; 14 served in Azov, 7 in Right Sector, 3 in Aidar, and 1

each from Dnipro-1 and Donbas. Two belonged to smaller battalions I decline to name in order to ensure anonymity. Two informants each served in two different battalions. I compared their narratives with those from six members of the regular armed forces. During my time in Ukraine, I also met with several hundred other people, including dozens of veterans from volunteer battalions and the Ukrainian armed forces. Like all encounters, these also added to my understanding of this case.

Eight of the 28 volunteer combatants can be described as key informants, and they appear under pseudonyms within these pages. Some I lived with, and others I continue to have regular contact with, usually over social media. Their narratives have been put into a broader sociological context. Like all ethnographies, this is ultimately a “positioned interpretation” (Mosse 2006, 941), if not an “interpretation of an interpretation” (van Maanen 2011, 165). In effect, the Ukrainian voices and views amount to their interpretations of the world and its workings, which I have subsequently compiled and reinterpreted into my own. However, as I will soon discuss, the mere reproduction of interpretations in such polarized settings is ethically questionable. While I have sought to present voices with direct experience in these pages – discussing them with informants for their review whenever possible – the interpretations and the arguments made here are ultimately my own.

I found my first informants among the Ukrainian volunteer battalions in April 2017. I simply approached several public figures who communicated in English-language social media through private messages. I subsequently met them in person in Ukraine to verify that these people were in fact who they claimed to be.

Throughout my research, I strove for transparency about my aims and myself. I soon wrote a “letter for potential new informants,” which I used as a template when approaching people. Because the first batch of English-speaking social media users was narrow, I subsequently asked them to introduce me to new interlocutors. This helped. In the letter I introduced myself, discussed my research, and promised to anonymize interviews if the

recipient consented to participate in the study. I always encouraged asking questions about me and my work – especially from common acquaintances. As a rule, I also attached examples of my previous open-access research on the war in Donbas when making introductions.

The specific aims of my research were initially broad. They concerned the war and its relationship with both civil society and the state. In the first letters I emphasized that I was after as broad a perspective as possible about what had happened and was happening in Ukraine. As time passed my focus and questions narrowed. For instance, I could ask my informants whether they knew of any volunteers who had joined the police, in the hope that their acquaintances could help me understand how volunteers influenced police reform.

These initial contacts soon led to introductions with other volunteers, and a snowball effect that continues at the time of this writing. Through handshakes and introductions, whatever reputation I accumulated transferred. Once we had acquaintances in common, I became less a random person, and increasingly an insider vouched for by someone trustworthy. While unintentional, considering how much of social life takes place online, it was perhaps inevitable in the early 21st century that social media would play such an important part in my research from the start. That said, the snowballing also ensured my sample was not limited to social media users.

While snowballing is often used to access hidden populations, such convenience sampling might have led me to find similar kinds of volunteers. As a result, I put my efforts into finding volunteers from different battalions who did not know each other. Finding a group of friends who served together during the war would have narrowed the representativeness of my sample. Socio-economic factors also influenced who had time to spare. For instance, interaction with informants with demanding jobs and young children as a rule became more focused and limited.

Though writing about people potentially encompasses a wide variety of methods, ethnography is often equated with participant

observation, as well as the resulting thick description of those observed. Participant observation involves an immersive study *with* people with whom a researcher has long-term, organic, and open-ended relationships, and often results in what Renato Rosaldo termed “deep hanging out” (Clifford 1996; Geertz 2000). This corresponds to David Mosse’s view, according to which anthropological knowledge is “essentially relational,” in the sense that “what anthropologists know is inseparable from their relationship with those they study” (Mosse 2006, 937).

Because of their relational nature, ethnographic studies are usually based on a limited number of data points. This limited breadth is compensated for by increased depth. For me this is the main strength of ethnography: depth allows asking questions in ways quantitative methods struggle to. In fact, understanding which questions are relevant often only comes through time and appreciation of a particular context. As my informants surely came to realize – to the frustration of some, I should add – a thoughtful answer to one of my questions often resulted in half a dozen more questions.

That said, increased depth does not automatically mean that ethnographic studies cannot speak of a broader population than the limited number of individuals studied. Much depends on how representative the individuals studied are of the larger population they can be claimed to represent. According to the most comprehensive survey to date, based on 396 responses collected between October 2015 and November 2016, the average frontline military volunteer was a male aged 20–29 years old who came from and lived in central Ukraine and spoke Ukrainian as a first language, was in a committed relationship but without children, and possessed higher education but lacked previous combat experience (Bulakh, Senkiv, and Teperik 2017, 12).

My sample was similar in most respects. Like me, most of the veterans I worked with were men in or around their thirties. The majority spoke Russian as their first language. My limited Ukrainian and almost non-existent Russian language skills limited my access to some informants and information, although translations

were often provided on a voluntary basis by other informants. Few of my volunteer informants were academically inclined, and most never attended college. My key informants included Ukrainians from western, central, eastern, and southern Ukraine who lived in or around Kyiv, as well as one foreign volunteer. Many of my informants frequented shooting ranges after returning from war, but none had been in combat and only the foreign volunteer had served in the military before 2014. Four of the volunteer battalion members I interviewed were women and all handled firearms during the war. Three of them were primarily paramedics rather than combatants, which reflects the stark gendering of warfare in Donbas (discussed in [Chapter 2](#)). While several of the battalions my informants belonged to have been viewed as promoting extreme right-wing ideology, my informants' decision to join a particular battalion was primarily based on considerations other than the battalions' ideological leanings (Aaliyev 2021, 32–33). As a result, the political views of my volunteer informants ranged from liberal to extreme right. None had been politically active in an organized way before the Maidan, which almost everyone supported. None subsequently joined any political parties. The majority had left the war by late 2015. All except the one foreign volunteer remobilized in 2022 after the large-scale Russian invasion.

It is understandably difficult to quantify relational depth, which ethnography seeks to translate into better, more contextualized, and in some cases broader understanding of a particular case. Spending much time in Ukraine with multiple interviewees was essential, but so was my continuous interaction with them afterward. Long-term and open-ended relationships also offer a promise of conducting research in a more ethical and less extractive manner.

Most research relationships are inherently asymmetric because of researchers' dependence on interlocutors for information. Relational depth can help to level this asymmetry, as well as to change the terms of exchange (Käihkö 2019; Winfield 2022). That said, it is also important to recognize that the asymmetry runs the other way as well. In the final telling, it has been I who compiled

the story of my interlocutors into this ethnography. As discussed shortly, this power differential was immediately grasped by some of my more thoughtful informants.

Long-term and open-ended relationships require that researchers put themselves into the research in a manner that renders the entire endeavor inherently untidy, at least if compared to the annals of social science methods that offer seemingly neat paths to success (Hoffman and Lubkemann 2005; Howell 2017; Ingold 2014; Shah 2017). The point is not to observe people from afar but to get close to them. As with all human relations, this led to unexpected situations. For instance, I wept as Anna described how, after her brother was killed in the war, the separatists' refusal to hand over his body caused such pain to her and her family. Was it justified for me to react in this way, when she claimed to be hard "like stone"? Did my questions make her and my other informants relive traumatic events? As Bourgois (2003, 13) argues, "in order to collect 'accurate data,' ethnographers violate the canons of positivist research; we become intimately involved with the people we study." Yet I observed how this works both ways, as the people we study also become involved with us, in a manner that can turn the endeavor into a potentially transformative one for all parties involved (Davies 2002, 6; Shah 2017).

Many of the interviews I conducted were informal in nature, with their structure arising naturally from our standard discussion of consent, the purpose of my study, and how the information offered by my informants would be used. While I always had a prepared list of questions on hand, a productive interview consisted more of exchange than extraction. Exchange may decrease the researcher's control over the interview and increase the prospect of influencing what the interviewee says. Yet I was happy to hear that at least some of my informants also learned from our interaction, suggesting that exchange can increase the likelihood of interviewees feeling the interview was worth their time. This is an absolute precondition to any kind of meaningful relationship, especially a long-term one (Wilson 2008). Interaction also appeared to make everyone feel more at ease than an interroga-

tion – especially when discussing sensitive topics. This kind of approach has been called “a participant-centered” one, where “the ethnographer works as a midwife, rather than the extractor, helping to birth the stories into the world” (Winfield 2022, 146). While interaction with some of the people I worked with lasted for several days at a time, my longest face-to-face interview – the first time I met Anna – continued for eight hours. A typical interview of the more formal kind was conducted in a café or a bar and lasted between two and three hours. Other types of interaction, such as living together with people or corresponding with them online on a regular basis, are more difficult to quantify.

While it would no doubt have been good to record face-to-face interviews for the sake of accuracy, I chose not to, as recording would have changed interview dynamics too much. It is also possible that voice recognition technology could be used to de-anonymize those I worked with. The decision to forfeit recording arose with my initial encounter with Sergey – a few days after choosing this alias he noted that the Ukrainian spelling is Serhiy – during my first stay in Kyiv. The first things he asked me were, “are you a journalist,” and “are you going to record this?” From his tone, I understood that the only acceptable answers to both questions were negative. Like all research, this study had to adhere to the “do no harm” research imperative (Wood 2006). Because of the volunteer battalions’ ambiguous legal status, all their members were aware that some activities they engaged in might come back to haunt them. As a result, it felt impossible for them and unethical for me to record anything that might hurt them later. While I tried to write extensive notes by hand during interviews, this was not always possible. In such cases, I wrote shorter notes as soon as I could. Identifying details, as well as anything my informants asked me to not write down, were left unwritten.

As with all research on living people, there is no doubt that my own persona and position greatly influenced my research. Working in close contact with informants for an extended period of time is ultimately based on mutual selection: both the ethnographer and those they work with must feel that the relationship is worth-

while (Bernard 2006, 196). It was likely easier for both me and my informants to relate to someone familiar. Here my background, physical appearance, interests, and persona likely contributed at times, while making things difficult at others. Some doors were opened, while others shut. This is likely inevitable in all research of living people, but is especially the case with attempts to study sensitive topics over a longer time period.

After about a year, one of my friends in Kyiv began to introduce me as “a Swedish-Finnish researcher and veteran who talks to people who kill other people.” While I initially felt uncomfortable with the description, I ultimately concluded that this was a good summary of who I am and what I was in Ukraine for. All this naturally influenced even my research.

My Swedish-Finnish roots and dual military-academic background no doubt played a role in my decision to investigate the war in Donbas and the willingness of my informants to participate in this process. In general, both Sweden and Finland enjoy a good reputation in Ukraine. Whereas Sweden is more active when it comes to foreign policy and support for Ukrainian civil society reforms, Finns are renowned for fighting against the Soviet Union in the Second World War. My military-academic background resulted in broad cultural capital, which has facilitated work with very different kinds of people. My military experience allowed me to comfortably discuss tactical and technical details of war and military life, and often to exchange personal experiences with my volunteer informants. The academic credentials have been more useful with engagements with people who did not directly participate in the war, and especially in more official circumstances.

Nature of War and Research Methodology

The above background and methods could fit almost any kind of fieldwork. Nevertheless, my notion of conflict ethnography builds on the recognition that research methods need to be tailored to the purpose, and the idea that the subject matter of conflict gives rise to specific methodological issues, which pose new

and exacerbate old methodological problems. These challenges can be framed as having to do with the particular nature of war, discussed by Carl von Clausewitz. According to him, it is the elements of danger, physical effort, uncertainty, and chance which constitute the atmosphere of war. For Clausewitz, war is “an act of violence intended to compel our opponent to fulfil our will,” as noted earlier, and “a continuation of politics by other means” (Clausewitz 2004, 39). As mentioned, this gives rise to three issues that permeate not only armed conflicts but also attempts to study them: use of force (violence), polarizing interaction among actors, and instrumentality (as armed conflicts are seen to be connected to higher political goals, and hence collectives in specific socio-cultural contexts). All these issues pose significant methodological challenges that deserve consideration.

Admittedly, violence, polarization, and political instrumentality are not necessarily limited to war: all of these factors were, for instance, present at the Maidan protests in early 2014. In the Global South use of force may indicate both times of strife as well as normal politics (Barkawi 2016, 205). While it is dictatorships in particular that habitually resort to force, sociological studies have identified violence as a cornerstone of modernity, which all states rely on (Malešević 2017). As Charles Tilly (1985) has observed, warfare, state-building, and organized crime are historically comparable activities. While violence, polarization, and political instrumentality may thus be present in other contexts, they are always present in war. The sections that follow focus on these three issues, and how they affected my research.

Violence

From the perspective of military theory, use of force – organized violence – separates war from other human interaction. Force is used in war to attain political aims through “the infliction of destruction, suffering and death” (Howard 1979, 3). It is nevertheless important to underline that actual use of force may be unnecessary – witness for instance the Russian attempts to coerce Ukraine

and the West into concessions by massing troops along Ukraine's borders during late 2021 and early 2022. When applied, violence almost inevitably leads to physical and psychological trauma. It is this presence of trauma that immediately separates the study of conflict from many other studies and brings ethical considerations to the center of all conflict-related research methodology. At minimum, any study of conflict needs to protect everyone participating in the research from harm. This applies both to researchers and to those we work with (Wood 2006). In my study, I sought to protect my subjects from any negative outcomes, including legal consequences and recurring psychological trauma.

In both literature and discussion about fieldwork, the focus has often been on "surviving" it (Howell 1990; Sriram et al. 2009). Safety issues and researchers' wellbeing should of course not be neglected or flat-out ignored (Lecocq 2002), but neither should it be forgotten that fieldwork is always a privilege. Exacerbated by my lack of institutional backing, funding, and insurance, I felt that violence influenced my initial research opportunities in Ukraine. At that time, it was not very difficult to travel to the contact line which separated territories controlled by the Kyiv government and the Russian-backed separatists. After the ATO ended in April 2018, armed forces took control of the war and immediately curtailed access to the front lines. Admittedly, researching the separatist side in Ukraine would have been much more interesting. One would, however, have immediately broken Ukrainian law upon entering separatist-controlled areas. Furthermore, reports of the treatment of journalists in separatist-controlled areas was not encouraging: separatists could arrest anyone for 30 days on mere suspicion and sentence people to long prison terms on seemingly flimsy grounds (Skorik 2018). Spying accusations are common in all conflict contexts (Driscoll and Schuster 2018; Sluka 1995). A few of my informants had been detained and tortured by separatists. All of this suggested that research in separatist-controlled areas would be well-nigh impossible.

For the most part, violence featured indirectly in my research, as shown in my conversations with Sergey. After I answered his

initial queries about recording and my professional identity to his satisfaction, we spent the day walking the streets of central Kyiv, recently cleared by a surprise sleet storm in near-freezing temperatures. This suited Sergey, who had recently returned from the ATO and who – like several other veterans – felt uneasy around groups. When I delivered Sergey to his wife at the end of the day, she was horrified to hear we had talked about her husband's war-time experiences. She subjected me to a long interrogation about my research and my intentions regarding her husband. Seemingly content with my responses, she then bought us all dinner.

While Sergey was later diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), common among my volunteer informants, he was lucky in the sense that he was one of the few who had not been physically injured. Several of my informants were seriously wounded in fighting and would never completely recover – even if they attended the state-sponsored month-long rehabilitation they were offered on an annual basis. Several others suffered more minor injuries. Only one claimed to have been left completely untouched by the war. To be honest, I never believed him.

For me, the most harrowing moment during my research in Ukraine was when a group of civil society reformers invited me to participate in the 2018 Pride parade in Kyiv. After accepting the invitation, I began to wonder what some of the people I worked with, who did not necessarily support LGBTQ rights, would think of my participation. While I admittedly feared a repeat of the kind of violence the march had been previously subjected to, my main worry was that my relationships with volunteer battalion members might suffer. In the end there was no negative effect, nor violent crackdown (although there were probably more members of various security forces than marchers, and 60 opponents of the march had been arrested before it commenced). I still found it impossible to write about this with my own name and, after some hesitation, only now feel able to do so because of the long-term relations with my main informants (Käihkö 2018c). A year later one of them was physically attacked for voicing his support online for a veteran who came out as gay.

Most of my veteran informants remained concerned about violence and prepared accordingly. Carrying knives was more the rule than the exception. Many owned rifles, others pistols that shot rubber bullets. While some of my informants – especially the investigative journalists – had real reason to consider self-defense, several others did so at least partly due to psychological trauma. As Kamila – a female veteran – admitted, carrying a knife made her feel better. She nevertheless doubted whether she could ever use it.

Trauma influenced my interviews in oppositional ways: it made my interviewees either more likely or less likely to talk about their war experiences. While I always made it clear that I am not trained in counseling, some of my informants obviously felt the need to speak. If the process brought any relief, all the better. Several times I nevertheless felt the need to protect my informants by abruptly changing topics after perceiving visible discomfort, and never returning to these issues. On some occasions, I gently recommended professional counseling and actively sought help for one person who we both believed would benefit from it (for an excellent discussion on how to prepare for these issues, see Winfield 2022). As can be expected, the large-scale Russian invasion in February 2022 only brought the issues about trauma to the fore for many scholars of Ukraine, and especially for Ukrainians.

Trauma can also lead to self-censorship, both for informants and researchers. After I first met Olexa, a veteran of the Donbas Battalion, in early 2019, he casually observed that he was happy that we did not meet earlier. He had lost almost everything because of the war and worried about the safety of his family who remained in a separatist-controlled area; it was only in that 2019 he felt ready to speak about his recent past. Yet, as Ivana Maček (2009, 12–13) observed, researchers too may encounter events which they have “no way of dealing with and become so distressed as to be unable to continue the work ... [K]ey psychological defense mechanisms make us hear, observe, and remember only those phenomena we are capable of dealing with and consign the rest to silence and seeming oblivion.” She admits not recognizing

accounts of psychological breakdowns in her material, until she was ready for them. For Jennifer Carroll (2022, 645–46) traumatic memories threaten insightful ethnography: “memories lacked an information hierarchy, no taxonomy with which to sort them by meaning, type, or relative importance ... Everything feels meaningful, but has no clear meaning.” More immediately, in private discussions researchers often admit that there are topics they cannot write about because of risks to them or their informants.

Polarization

Violence is closely connected with another factor present in all war – polarization. As the saying attributed to Aeschylus goes, the first victim of war is truth. Less known is Eric Leed’s (1979) addition that the second victim of war is ambiguity. To some extent both truth and ambiguity become the victims of organized violence used to achieve political purposes: polarization often results in loss of ambiguity.

Justifying organized violence requires ideology, or designating categories of people against whom violence can be legitimately used (Schmitt 2007; Malešević 2010, 83–84). This often entails the dehumanization of others. Even without this dehumanization, simply distinguishing “us” from “them” can curtail individual agency. Such polarization is an inseparable part of war, and often a goal in itself. Polarization has grave methodological consequences because it constrains ambiguity. The restoration of ambiguity is absolutely necessary for understanding complex realities. Grand narratives of warring nations and political systems are like brooms that simplify as they sweep away individuals and their agency. Herein lies the strength of ethnography: by focusing on the everyday, ethnography promises to restore ambiguity and nuance to polarized and politicized settings.

In many ways, my research experience has been humbling. I have met dozens of interesting people who, instead of merely complaining, acted to make a difference. Many have dedicated their lives to making the world a better place. Some risked those

lives for things they believe in. Several have been hurt in the process, emotionally, physically, or psychologically. These wounds were readily apparent during our interviews, and not only the times I visited a military hospital in Kyiv. While I am grateful for the privilege to have met all these people, this has also exacerbated a feeling that has weighed heavily on me throughout this research: ultimately, I feel that my attempt to offer a nuanced perspective of a polarized situation will leave many who helped me disappointed. It is not obvious for me that nuance and restoration of ambiguity are always welcome in polarized contexts, nor am I convinced that all my informants welcome my attempt to explore shades of gray in grand narratives.

In my defense, the expectations of my work may be unrealistic. As one of my informants explained after one of my early writings on Ukraine was cited, somewhat to my surprise, by a better-known researcher, "What you do describing Ukrainian events is very important in general. And it is specifically important for us here in Ukraine." What I hope I have been clear about from the start is that, while I seek to give voice to Ukrainians, it would be irresponsible and unprofessional to do so uncritically.

Olexa summarized the core of my research well when he told me that I was "making the easy thing hard." I had asked him about the Myrotvorets (Peacemaker) organization, which hosts a database he described as a political instrument for counterterrorism in Ukraine. Launched in December 2014, Myrotvorets collects personal information about people believed to be conspiring against the country. Most of the entries consist of information taken from social media posts and are used as evidence against the accused. While the freely accessible database focuses on separatists fighting against Ukrainian forces, it also lists many individuals critical of the war in Donbas, including journalists and human rights activists who have worked in separatist-controlled areas.

Myrotvorets and its separatist counterpart Tribunal offer concrete examples of the difficulties of researching politicized contexts like war. The two databases epitomized the two polarized extremes of the war in Donbas, allowing little if any middle

ground. Some informants proudly showed me their entries in Tribunal, as if it were a badge of honor. In most cases, their entries consisted of several social media profile pictures in which they wore uniforms and held guns, with little more information than their names. Both databases were reportedly also employed by Ukrainian and Russian law enforcement and intelligence agencies.

The most obvious way use of force contributes to polarization is its creation and strengthening of ideas of “us” and “them” (Centeno and Enriquez 2016, 25–27), often leading to standardized and conformist narratives along this division. While it is important to understand these narratives, polarization frequently makes them black and white, separated with little if any gray or ambiguity. As Clausewitz notes, “national hatred . . . is a substitute for personal hostility in the breast of individual opposed to individual.” But even in the absence of national hatred, Clausewitz saw that combat kindles a hostile feeling (Clausewitz 2004, 78). Polarization contributes to extremes, and in so doing narrows alternatives between them. As George Orwell (1942) provocatively argued during the Second World War, pacifism was “objectively pro-Fascist.” There was no middle ground in war, so those who did not fight against Adolf Hitler sided with him. While certainly not a militarist, the war made Orwell a nationalist who drew from his experience in the Spanish Civil War, where he witnessed totalitarianism in both its left- and right-wing forms. For Orwell, the argument about pacifists as pro-fascists at the time he was writing was “elementary common sense. If you hamper the war effort of one side, you automatically help that of the other. Nor is there any real way of remaining outside such a war as the present one. In practice, ‘he that is not with me is against me.’”

As demonstrated in the Second World War, “despotic governments can stand ‘moral force’ till the cows come home; what they fear is physical force” (Orwell 1942). This made fighting back the only alternative. From the perspective of many of my informants, the situation was no different in Ukraine. Protestors used social media to mobilize themselves from the early days of the Maidan, and soon the rumors of separatist tanks with “to Kyiv” written on

their barrels in the spring of 2014 threatened any pretense of staying neutral. Of course, the same dynamics also applied in eastern Ukraine, where some viewed the Maidan Revolution as nothing more than a fascist coup d'état (Giuliano 2018). Soon a plethora of major and minor differences polarized into two main and mutually opposing narratives – that of the government in Kyiv against that of the pro-Russian separatists. This polarization also limited political and public debate, as anyone who disagreed was labeled “pro-Russian” or fascist, and hence a traitor. In such contexts few sources of data are left unbiased (Wood 2006, 373).

Restoring ambiguity is both difficult and risky. Self-censorship in research is encouraged by the fear of disappointing friends, angering colleagues and funders, and ending up on a counter-terrorist list used by government agencies. Critics of the war in Ukraine have been killed, especially in separatist-controlled areas and Russia, but even at home. In fact, several Ukrainians I met have had to curtail their public appearances because of fears for their safety precisely because they sought to criticize the hegemonic narratives. A few have relocated or sought to relocate abroad, farther away from both Russia and Ukraine.

The methodological risks involved in nuancing our views of the war in Donbas in particular are visible in some existing literature, which has supported one side over the other (see, for example, Kuzio 2018). For instance, some previous research on the volunteer battalions downplays their more troubling aspects. One should indeed be cautious when a scientific study recommends the propagation of the volunteer battalions' heroism for national and patriotic education (Stasyuk 2018, 239). Propaganda should not be the aim of research. At times, however, even correct observations demand contextualization. While it is true that the battalions helped ensure national order (Bulakh, Senkiv, and Teperik 2017, 4), this needs to be put in context. It should not be forgotten that portions of the Ukrainian population perceived the Maidan Revolution as a violent coup, contesting the legitimacy of both law and order. The volunteer battalions sought to establish a specific kind of order, and they violated some of the existing laws in

the process. Accounts that argue that the state controlled the volunteer battalions will inevitably claim that everything was done lawfully. It is problematic when issues like the criminal behavior of some battalions, decried by volunteers of these very battalions (discussed in later chapters), are downplayed as mere Russian propaganda (Stasyuk 2018, 100–01). This is not to say that the situation is a zero-sum game, where things were thus better on the separatist side. They were not. But as one group of Azov veterans morbidly joked, “War is hell – and we are the demons.” In order to understand phenomena like war, it is necessary to dig deeper and go beyond polarized accounts that tend to be both simplified and whitewashed. Perhaps the only way to be certain one has found middle ground is when one’s results are criticized by all belligerents, but for different reasons. Even then, polarized topics do not lend themselves to final pronouncements, even if the political instrumentality inherent in war seeks to claim the last word.

Instrumentality

While polarization suggests more unconscious seduction, instrumentality leads to conscious strategies of misdirection. For Orwell, “all propaganda is lies, even when one is telling the truth.” That said, he did not “think this matters so long as one knows what one is doing, and why” (Orwell 2012). While the first part referred to polarization and its effects, his addition concerned instrumentality. For Orwell the propagandist, the ends seemed to justify the means in a way bound to cause methodological quandaries for researchers.

A concrete example of these intricacies comes in the form of the first exhibition piece in the Mystetskyi Arsenal National Art and Culture Museum Complex in Kyiv, which features a brick wall in the shape of Ukraine. When I first witnessed the outdoor exhibit in November 2017, the scene was dusted in a gentle snowfall. While the separatist-controlled parts of Donbas remained as parts of the wall, the Crimean Peninsula was removed from the rest of the country, and lay on the ground.

One could interpret this art installation as implying that Crimea was lost whereas Donbas remained an inseparable part of Ukraine. Voicing such an interpretation posed risks, however. The following March, two Ukrainian television stations showed graphics of Ukraine without Crimea. An angry online reaction followed, prompting the deputy prime minister to publicly accuse the stations of inciting provocation just before the Russian presidential elections (Bell and Zotsenko 2018). The case illustrates a widespread view in Ukraine that information forms the main part of “hybrid” warfare – a front where Kyiv was perceived to have lagged behind Russia from the start. The political stakes and instrumentality highlight how the study of conflict differs from that of non-politicized contexts, as even information – potentially including my research – can become subject to weaponization.

The term “fog of war” refers to an inherent uncertainty which thwarts objective knowledge and “gives to things exaggerated dimensions and an unnatural appearance” (Clausewitz 2004, 80). This uncertainty is exacerbated by instrumentality: as noted by Barkawi (2016, 203), “The political character of war confounds efforts to establish what war is and when it is or is not happening.” The political stakes of war also mean that finding out *what* happens in war becomes difficult: actors with sufficient capacity perhaps understandably seek to censure information that could put one at a disadvantage, for instance through afflicting morale or exposing one’s side militarily.

Those without the capacity to control information are unlikely to keep records in the first place. Both propaganda and lack of records hinder puzzling together what transpires in war. With few public accounts available about the volunteer battalions, the only way I could study them was through direct interaction with their members. As happens every so often, and is true for the war in Donbas, different parties to the conflict employ different terminology when discussing it (Zoria 2019). As noted, the events at the Maidan constitute a Revolution of Dignity in one narrative, and an illegal coup d’état in another. The same goes for the war in

Donbas, which for one side was a Russian invasion, for the other a civil war.

Any researcher that studies an ongoing or poorly recorded conflict inevitably encounters accounts that may not only be biased, but intentionally propagandistic. While I have drawn from Western and Ukrainian news reporting, I am fully aware that some of these accounts were partial at best. Again, all these accounts should be compared to other evidence. I do feel more comfortable in cases where written accounts support the views of my informants, but this often will not be the case. I am aware that many, but far from all, of my informants are vehemently against the Russian state because of the war. As always, the challenge is to remain critical even of their views, and to distinguish my interpretation from that of my informants.

The main disagreement in the war in Ukraine concerns Russian involvement: to put this in the terminology employed a century ago in Russia, was the war in Donbas a revolution from within or from without (Kotkin 2015, 373)? While it is generally accepted that Russia indeed supported separatists, the timing and extent of this support continues to be a point of contention (Arel and Driscoll 2023; Hauter 2021; Sæther 2023).

I have no doubt that some of my informants have, if not lied, then at least withheld information. This is likely to be true of all informants in all research projects, regardless of who they are or what is being studied. I nevertheless believe that my emphasis on grassroots-level actors over an extended period of time and triangulation with other sources have alleviated these concerns. Some of my informants have been surprisingly forthright about disturbing events and problematic issues. While I have been careful to advise my informants not to disclose information that would incriminate them, our discussions nevertheless led to unexpected revelations. Usually these came after considerable time – which has also allowed control of narratives' consistency.

In one case, only after knowing each other for over one and a half years did one of my main informants spontaneously discuss how volunteers used violence during the war. It was -12°C , and

we stood outside a remote coffee kiosk in one of Kyiv's numerous suburbs. It was apparent that this discussion could not have happened sooner, nor could I take for granted that this topic could ever be broached again. We huddled in the darkening evening, talking in low voices. I first lost feeling in my feet from the cold, and by the end of our discussion the black sugary tea I was buying to keep myself warm spilled because my hands were shaking so much. I stayed as long as I could, typing notes only after I got to the subway, rushing to a previously agreed meeting with another volunteer battalion fighter. To this day, I do not know why the informant decided to tell me about these events, which would have disturbed many. Perhaps he simply needed to get it out of his system. I could have asked, but I worried this would decrease the likelihood of hearing such stories again. For me ethnography and the multiple interactions it entails offers the only way to do justice to human complexity. It is only through deeper relationships and time that we can understand the complex and not seldom contradictory dimensions that make us human. One part of this is finding out whether my informants do what they say they do. In case of discrepancy, ethnography can help to understand its cause (Howell 2017, 17). Memories change over time, as does our interpretation of events. The continued consistency of narratives over several years nevertheless adds to my confidence in their accuracy.

Throughout the process, I have been surprised by how easy the investigation of war in Ukraine felt in comparison to my previous work with former combatants in Liberia, where I was constantly met with suspicion. There are several possible explanations for the difference, but one was no doubt of the legitimacy – if not necessity – of the war in Ukraine held by many volunteers. While these views explain the willingness of my informants to speak in the first place, compared to Liberia the narratives I compiled in Ukraine appear more comprehensive and structured. Several people I worked with also repeatedly emphasized that they would only answer questions about things they personally witnessed. As Olexa explained, "I know only what I saw. No lies or propaganda.

Truth is the best weapon. Who lies ... fails.” While I sympathize with his choice, the downside to these informants’ wariness of contextualizing things they had not experienced themselves was that this left me struggling to decipher them on my own. Triangulation with previous research and writing has again been crucial.

Ethnographies build on narratives of people – in my case mainly the types who fought for Ukraine, and who can be assumed to feel strongly about their cause. How does one avoid exacerbating the conflict by simply becoming a legitimizing megaphone for biased views? As Louisa Lombard (2016, 31) has argued, “with analysis ... our goal is not simply to reproduce ‘native’ categories but to understand and explain them – to see what they do. We want to understand the hows and the whys.” I have also used “native” categories to reflect on the ones used in Western academia. Such analysis is fundamentally the difference between science and journalism, which focuses on reporting and witnessing, as well as science and policy, which is by nature instrumental. Analysis is also one way to distinguish my interviews from my own interpretation, which I have sought to keep separate to the greatest extent possible.

Chatnography

It was a summer day in 2017 when Vadim said he needed to talk. One of his comrades had been seriously wounded in a mortar attack, and Vadim himself had been ill for several days. While he comforted himself with not having sighted enemy tanks for some time, things could obviously have been better. I hoped I was of some consolation, but these glimpses from the front lines of the war in Donbas nevertheless felt out of place in my quiet life in Uppsala, Sweden, where by that time I spent up to several hours on a daily basis chatting over social media with volunteers fighting in the war.

Considering that I was in Liberia when I first connected with some volunteers, social media has been a central part of my study from the start. This is hardly surprising, considering how it has

become such an inseparable part of our public lives, with social interaction increasingly conducted online. Even the Maidan Revolution that led to the toppling of President Viktor Yanukovich began with a Facebook post that noted “‘Likes’ don’t count” (Onuch and Sasse 2016; Shore 2017, 32). Sitting at home and pushing the like button would not suffice; people needed to take to the streets. And as many participants in the revolution emphasized during interviews, the logistics of the revolution alone required modern communications technology. Later, even war was waged through social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and the Russian VKontakte, which in May 2017 was banned in Ukraine as a weapon of war. Logistics were sought and motivation maintained through combat videos and memes. Virtual warriors sought to “dox” – reveal the identities of – their adversaries, with many ending up in the Myrotvorets and Tribunal databases. Social media was also used to send threats (and worse) to those doxed, as well their nearest and dearest.

Unexpectedly, I coined the term “chatnography” – the online dimension of my broader ethnographic approach that concerns interaction through social media – and it became a cornerstone of my early research of the volunteer battalions (Käihkö 2020a; 2020b). The benefits of chatnography were immediately apparent. Having contacted my first informants like Vadim over social media, they extended introductions over the same platforms to people like Sergey. With a limited travel budget, chatnography offered a flying start in the early days of my research: it allowed me to stay in touch with my informants and contact new ones, even when I was not in Ukraine. Social media and instant messaging thus enabled me to maintain a presence in informants’ lives even when I was physically absent. In the case of Vadim, it was over a year before we met for the first time, and then another year before our second meeting. Nevertheless, we have at times been in contact on a daily, or more commonly weekly, basis. The same has been true with many of my informants since 2017.

Several social media platforms are structured as “walled gardens” or “series of concentric circles.” It is often necessary to cre-

ate an account and “friend” others to see what they do online and who they interact with (Rogers 2013, 25). With every new “friend” I could observe more of their and their acquaintances lives online. Having observed some people online, it was easier to meet them offline. Mutual “friends” made meeting new people easier even in offline contexts.

Having accidentally stumbled into chatnography, the approach soon raised new methodological challenges and exacerbated those that had to do with violence, polarization, and instrumentality. This became apparent during my second trip to Ukraine in fall 2017. Sergey offered to pick me up from the airport and invited me to stay at his place. A few days prior to my journey, he became preoccupied by something he was unwilling to discuss. Once seated in his car, I took up the issue and joked that I had been uncertain whether he would be there to meet me in the first place. Sergey answered by casually stating that he believed the Ukrainian security services were monitoring his communication, so there were limits to what we could discuss online. Caught unaware, I felt stupid and ashamed for not considering the range of potential negative consequences for his participation in my research beforehand. With other informants voicing similar suspicions, even the adoption of increasingly encrypted instant messaging apps failed to alleviate concerns. It soon became clear that chatnography alone could never suffice in my research.

Chatnography soon also presented another problem, as it effectively erased the boundary between “field” and “home,” “work” and “life,” and “personal” and “professional.” While traditional ethnography has emphasized the need for us to come as close to those studied as possible, data collection in “the field” could still be separated from writing at “home” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Mosse 2006, 937). This was not possible when those I worked with could reach me round the clock, literally by pressing a button (or a touchscreen). Having befriended many of my informants, I for instance felt I had to be available when Sergey needed to talk about his PTSD. I also soon became aware of my previously unconscious limitation of my own online activity, lest this cause

complications with my informants. On social media, polarization showed itself by the seemingly endless repetition of standardized narratives about war between Russia and Ukraine. While it is important to understand the hegemonic narratives about the war, these left little room for ambiguities and complexities. While people I would never meet in real life were willing to share their views through social media, they often followed the standardized, polarized narratives. It became increasingly clear that ambiguities and complexities could only be gained through deeper and more personal engagement.

Facing a situation where a method insufficient against the quandaries posed by the subject matter of conflict demanded ever more time, I began to emphasize more traditional fieldwork. As a result, I took more trips to Ukraine to spend time with volunteer battalion fighters and conducted more interviews with other informants. Yet, as the internet facilitates much of our social lives, especially in cases where physical distance separates us from those we work with, social media most conveniently bridges the gap. Online means of communication will thus remain an important part of almost any ethnographic study in the future. Until the very end of writing this book – and despite first the Covid-19 pandemic and then the Russian invasion – I could, for instance, conduct fact-checking with my informants through instant messaging. Nevertheless, and not least because of the sensitivity of conflict-related research, chatnography is unlikely to take us as far as more traditional ethnographic fieldwork conducted face-to-face.

A Methodological Conclusion

A study based on open-ended relationships is likely always to remain a work in progress. Even in this book I can only offer the best of my current understanding of the role the volunteer battalions played in the war in Donbas, and how they affected Ukraine and the first year of the large-scale fighting after February 2022. As I have argued here, studies of conflict often present consider-

able predicaments. While I have done my best to overcome them, I cannot yet offer any final word to either strategy or Ukrainian volunteer battalions. Whether I succeed in nuancing our understanding of war in general and in Ukraine in particular with this volume is of course up to the reader to decide. Here I hope my methodological transparency has been helpful in, if not persuading the reader, then at least in pointing out some of the pitfalls in the study of conflict and other politicized phenomena that can help others to do better.

CHAPTER 2

Portrayals of Key Informants

This ethnographic chapter introduces some of the key informants. Through the portrayals of the informants, some thematic issues are raised, which warrant further attention. The first section discusses veterans' psychological wellbeing, the connections between volunteer battalions, and authorities and police reform. The second section emphasizes the stark gendering of the war, while the third sheds light on some of the international dimensions of the war in Ukraine and why foreign volunteers may come closest to an ideal type of volunteer.

Volunteers' Reformist Journey

War completely changed the trajectory of Sergey's life. He gained a new identity and priorities, which also made his journey home from the front lines long and arduous. Immediately after the Maidan Revolution he successfully joined a volunteer battalion – only to hear that his technical skills made him too valuable for the front lines. It took much cajoling and pleading before he made it to the war. Since his unit was integrated into the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MoIA) as a special police entity at the front, Sergey remained a police officer when he returned. By that time the deputy commander of the Azov Battalion, Vadim Troyan, had been appointed head of the Kyiv regional police. Sergey's case offers an example of how the volunteers' reformist Spirit of 2014 led them to war, but soon fizzled out when it faced resistance upon their return. The case also illustrates how volunteers could leave the

war, but the war refused to leave them. Sergey's case supports Olexa's view that "people do not come back from war."

After returning from Donbas, Sergey claimed he had left the war without a scratch, aside from his nightmares of capture by separatists. He felt discomfort in crowds, but this was common for many veterans. Sergey even visited a psychologist after his return, who told him that he was adept at warfare. According to the psychologist, Sergey's issues with anger management were merely part of his newly discovered warrior side. It was apparently positive that Sergey came to realize this part of himself, and that it made him immune to PTSD.

After his return, Sergey continued to work in the police, but always expecting to be sent back to war. Sergey once compared his war to a safari, where it was the strongest of feelings when someone was shooting at you, and you shot back. This moment had so powerful a meaning that nothing else compared to it. No wonder the peaceful civilian life that followed made for a mundane, boring, and ultimately meaningless existence.

As time passed and the front lines stabilized, the chances of redeployment grew ever more remote. In the meantime, Sergey continued frontline activities back home. Considering that police brutality ignited the popular protests at the Maidan, police reform was prioritized after the revolution. While the reform was well received, it focused on patrol police, which constituted around a tenth of the whole force (Friesendorf 2019, 116). Up to 20 percent of the recruits in the reformed patrol police came from among Maidan veterans (Marat 2018, 122). The decision to bring frontline veterans – many of whom were also Maidan veterans – into the hitherto unreformed parts of the force was perhaps based on reformist intent. A more cynical explanation follows the historical trend in Ukraine where the safety of the regime has been emphasized at the cost of its subjects (Friesendorf 2019, 111): perhaps Arsen Avakov, the minister of internal affairs, wanted to reward the volunteers who fought against separatism – and to keep what he took as a politically loyal force close at hand in case he needed them.

Sergey and his colleagues operated between unreformed local police and their commanders in a way that gave them an oversight function. In an effort to curb corruption and inefficiency, reports from patrol police passed first to the volunteers before reaching commanders. All this would have been inconceivable without trust in the volunteers. It is clear in the veteran police narratives that they sought reform. For instance, Sergey swears that he never took bribes, although he witnessed the older police do so. Nevertheless, from Sergey's narratives alone it is clear that he and his colleagues brought not only their assault rifles but also their newly found "can do" military mindset to their new task. Volunteers either teamed with two local patrol police or went to problematic areas as a squad. The squad soon began to go through old cases the local police had filed but done nothing about. For instance, someone who previously threatened the police with a hand grenade was arrested by Sergey's squad. The arrest involved bruises and broken bones.

It is fair to note that the Ukrainian police has a long history of abuse. In a 2012 poll, 65 percent of officers polled considered torture appropriate when investigating crime (Friesendorf 2019, 117). According to Sergey, regulations required officers to file a report if they used mace or hit someone with a nightstick. However, punching someone with a fist did not need to be reported. Therefore, police volunteers like Sergey – sometimes called "Azovites" as many, like Troyan, came from Azov – were dubbed "punchers." While Sergey's interpretation was questioned by a Ukrainian expert on police reform I consulted, this would nevertheless explain why it was easier to rough people up with hands than with equipment. Another reason to use violence was to dissuade offenders from threatening their victims while awaiting trial.

In Sergey's telling, the police volunteers' eagerness led to their downfall. While the volunteers wanted to improve things, improvement proved impossible in a rotten system. The volunteers were often placed in what Sergey described as a "political" company. Yet, when discussing the matter, Sergey referred to gulags, where

political and criminal prisoners were separated from each other. Faced with the volunteers' reformism, the old power structures resisted change. The most vocal volunteers were the first to be pushed out, but this fate was gradually met by almost all of them. As Sergey put it, this was a "reaction ... to preserve the old order," or the pre-Maidan power structures which saw the volunteers as Maidan activists. From the volunteers' perspective, this old order was exactly what many of them opposed on the Maidan. None of them fought for the preservation of this order, but for a Ukraine without it.

Volunteers' frustration grew gradually when exposed to what Sergey and others called "Soviet stupidity." Before a roll call scheduled for the following day, Sergey and I went through a list of mandatory equipment that he had never received but was expected to present. The list, which likely had not been updated since the Soviet era, included candles, colored pencils, a whistle, and a curvimeter (which I had never heard of before and had to Google). Failure to adhere to regulations brought sanctions. The volunteers also began to receive orders while on leave. Overall, they felt that their careers were dead ends. According to several informants, police protect if not control a plethora of illicit activities in Ukraine. In Sergey's telling, the volunteers were pushed out after they moved against an illegal casino business, protected by the old police. After this, Sergey's unit was made "the target of Berkut crowd control practice." Faced with the still-hated Berkut (special police responsible for riot policing, among other things) and the prospect of ending up doing crowd control themselves, Sergey quit the force. Sharing the opinion of other volunteers (Interfax-Ukraine 2017a; Novoye Vremya 2017), Sergey felt the system successfully protected itself.

After leaving the police, Sergey was employed by a private security company whose owner had relations with the Ukrainian security services. Some of Sergey's comrades who served in the war also worked for the company. For a time, this appeared the best of both worlds. Sergey enjoyed the comradery of brothers-in-arms, a reasonable paycheck and limited "stupidity." Guarding

critical infrastructure appeared to be soft work, although a few of our common acquaintances saw a more sinister possibility. Some of the sites were also used for polling stations in the coming elections. Perhaps the force would enable election fraud? Within a year and before the elections the company abruptly lost its contracts and was forced to lay off personnel. Sergey became unemployed. By this time, many in Sergey's group had already planned to enlist to the military and return to war. Others, like Sergey, were more interested in the global private security business. Sergey thought this was a "good job for [a] real [C]ossack." In this market, Ukrainians earn half of what other Europeans do, but twice as much as Indians and Filipinos, not to speak of Africans.

By this time, Sergey admitted his anger management issues whenever he perceived injustice, and later he acknowledged that he suffered from PTSD. After a relative harassed his wife, Sergey had to be restrained by his colleagues from getting his rifle and retaliating. Following consultation within the family, Sergey visited a psychologist once and received medication for a month. He claims to have been cured.

The signs had admittedly been there for some time. At one wedding, civilians had fun on one side, while veterans lined the wall on the other. The veterans were mostly quiet. If they spoke, they used low voices to speak about the war and how they felt left out. As Sergey described the event, it was a "PTSD party." Overall, he had little contact with his old friends from the times before the war. Once he admitted that he had nothing to say to civilians; it was as if there was a growing gulf between him and most of society. Either Sergey had been changed by the war, or he returned to a society that had changed while he was away. Perhaps both.

Sergey's case was hardly unique. One Second World War study found that following two months of continuous combat, 98 percent of soldiers became psychological casualties (Grossman 2009, 43–44). In September 2017 the chief psychiatrist of the Ministry of Defense (MoD), Colonel Oleh Druz, told the Verkhovna Rada (Ukrainian parliament) that 93 percent of veterans constitute a "hidden threat" as they "can become a threat both to their

own families and to entire society after they end their service” (UNIAN 2017). Druz’s inflammatory comments were understood to demonize veterans. He was soon sacked, while many veterans began to call themselves part of the “93 percent.” Several of those interviewed felt they had fallen behind in life in comparison to those who had not served and who did not bear the marks of war. Assumptions about veterans’ psychological problems furthermore made finding employment more difficult in an already tough job market.

Burzhua was one of those openly calling himself a “93 percenter.” He summarized his frustration with what he witnessed in Ukraine by noting that he sometimes found himself

subconsciously craving that black-and-white simplicity to offset the overwhelming grayness of the mundane. It’s ... the compromise that I am sick and tired of ... There’s so much shit around that is just wrong – and the first instinct is to go tackle this shit. But then stuff comes up – work, family, time, social restrictions – what have you. And you just choose to ignore it. And you consciously understand that you choose to turn your blind eye to it because of whatever reasons. And that’s fucking depressing. And that is when you just want to go back to the front lines.

By January 1, 2019, close to 355,000 veterans had been officially given combatant status for having participated in the ATO and the Joint Forces Operation (Interfax-Ukraine 2019a). However, not all applied for such status. At least 1,000 had taken their own lives (Ponomarenko 2018). The latter figure should be taken with caution, however, and may be low. Suicides on the front lines were usually reported as combat casualties, for families to receive compensation from the state. Several informants working with veterans also doubted the government statistics on suicide. According to them, even those who took their own lives at home were reported as civilians instead of veterans. These informants effectively claimed that official statistics only counted the suicides of servicemen and servicewomen, and even then only when they were not deployed to the front lines. Sergey’s case highlights

how even the strongest may be scathed in war, and how even the brightest flames of the Spirit of 2014 flickered.

While Sergey and his comrades risked their lives for a better Ukraine, the limits of the ensuing reforms are evident in how little help veterans received upon returning. While those veterans with official status were entitled to free public transport, according to Sergey some *marshrutka*, or private minibuses, refused to honor it. Like so many other problems, punching solved this one too. The core problems of limited political reform alongside war and its influence on those who had waged it were unfortunately much more difficult to manage.

While none of the volunteer informants interviewed professed much faith in the political system, they simultaneously offered an interesting perspective on the relationship between soldiering and citizenship. When Olexa came to Kyiv from war, he had no home, income, or job. Faced with questions about a new revolution, he answered that the war curtailed his participation in political processes – he had not even been able to vote. Privately, he thought that civilians who depended on him to improve their lot did not deserve anything better. Viewing the war through a nationalist lens, some Ukrainians like Olexa found that after fighting for Ukraine they, for the first time ever, *felt* Ukrainian. At the same time the absence of victory suggested nothing less than a moral failure on behalf of Ukrainians (Hutchinson 2018). Despite their love for Ukraine, many informants described their compatriots as ignorant, stupid, and unpatriotic. For most, it was nevertheless easier to shift the blame onto politicians who had failed the people. As Olexa explained, politicians were worse than the enemies he had fought in Donbas because politicians pretended to side with the volunteers. In comparison, the enemies were at least honest.

Olexa had done his best to be a model citizen after returning from the war. He even collected his cigarette butts instead of throwing them on the street. However, within a year he began to conform to the same political apathy most of the volunteers interviewed spoke of. Simply put, Olexa reached the conclusion

that it was futile to be a perfect citizen in an imperfect place like Ukraine. A few other volunteers interviewed held radical opinions that did not bode well for the future of a democratic Ukraine. Yet, even if he claimed otherwise, Olexa still occasionally put his cigarette butts in the trash. Both he and Sergey went out of their way to help other people when help was needed. This suggested that not all hope was lost, nor was the Spirit of 2014 altogether a bygone phenomenon. In their own ways, both Olexa and Sergey offered examples of model citizenship. Unsurprisingly, within hours of the Russian invasion in February 2022, they again took up arms to defend Ukraine.

The Gendered War in Donbas

Throughout her life, Anna's father had praised the patriots who fought for Ukraine. These men were invincible like steel. The problem for Anna was that these heroes were men, while all the authorities around her incessantly reminded her that she was a woman and therefore a nobody. While Anna's father had raised her in the halo of Ukrainian patriots, he could not understand why she wanted to volunteer for war once it began in 2014. Soldiers were men, and Anna was a woman. As he told Anna, she could never be a hero like the men who had come before her, and who she should continue to look up to.

War tends to be a gendered phenomenon (Goldstein 2006), and Anna's father offers a concrete illustration of how soldiering continues to be associated with masculinity and manliness. Equating soldiering with fighting has caused the important roles women play in war to remain less recognized. This gendering of war as masculine is hardly limited to Ukraine, nor to the post-Soviet sphere. Yet the contradiction between the stereotype and reality is perhaps greatest here. During the Second World War millions of women were involved in the war efforts of both the Soviet Union and the nationalist movements which opposed it. Soviet women assumed almost all imaginable roles from farming and industrial work that contributed to the maintenance of the

armed forces to piloting and fighting on the front lines. More than 900,000 women served in the armed forces, including 520,000 in the field army. Around 200,000 were combat medics and 120,000 held combat roles (Krylova 2010, 145, 169). Yet after the war their crucial participation was largely written out of the official historiography. It is only recently that their invaluable contributions – or as the Ukrainian-born Nobel laureate Svetlana Alexievich put it, “the unwomanly face of war” (Alexievich 2018) – have received more attention. The way Soviet women’s role in war was remembered affected their standing in the Soviet society for years, even decades to come – as did the choices made by Ukrainian women who chose to participate in the war in 2014 and after. The way their participation was remembered would likely in turn influence the standing of Ukrainian women in the future.

In 2014 mobilization to war through state structures was not helped by lack of preparation and strict observance of (what was often perceived as obsolete, Soviet-era) legislation. Some laws, such as the 1971 Labor Code of Ukraine, were nevertheless gendered in the sense that they sought to “protect” women, and hence prohibited hiring them in certain professions. Not surprisingly, because of the association with “manhood,” these included most military positions (Khromeychuk 2018). The result was that female snipers serving in the ATO zone, for instance, were recorded as kitchen workers. In addition to avoiding unnecessary red tape, women could also escape this kind of legalized discrimination in volunteer battalions. As late as January 2016 female soldiers and veterans demonstrated outside the MoD in Kyiv. Armed with kitchen utensils, they demanded legislative reform to better match the realities they had lived with for almost two years already.

While advocacy and protest resulted in modest reforms, perceptions were slower to change. In addition to gendered laws, gender stereotypes also limited women’s participation in the revolution and the war that followed. Already at the Maidan, protesting was strongly associated with masculinity, and nonparticipation as cowardly and feminine. Increasing violence and the onset of the

war only strengthened these stereotypes. Women who belonged to the armed forces faced horizontal and vertical gender segregation – they could not legally take some jobs and were largely relegated to low-ranking “feminized” positions – but also found that they were invisible to the male-dominated organization. Many women struggled to find appropriately sized equipment, and thus served and fought in men’s clothing. There were few if any gynecologists deployed to the front lines. The notion that female combatants went to war just to find husbands was widespread (Grytsenko, Kvit, and Martsenyuk 2016; Khromeychuk 2018), even among the male informants interviewed. In what must be taken as an indication of how abnormal they found female soldiering, some of them noted that “crazy” white supremacist ideologies were another, less predominant reason for women to join the war. While there were always one or two exceptions of “cool fighters,” the consensus was that women were useless as combatants.

By August 2018, 12,000 women had been officially recognized as combat participants in Ukraine. This constituted 3.5 percent of the total number, which by then was around 345,000 (Martsenyuk et al. 2019, 42). Despite this contribution, female combatants were largely relegated to the so-called “invisible battalion,” which consists of the women who participated in the war on the Ukrainian side. It is common that traditional gender roles break down during conflict, but equally common that they are restored after things calm down. The Invisible Battalion – a documentary, social media campaign, and research program at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy (Grytsenko, Kvit, and Martsenyuk 2016; Hrytsenko, Kvit, and Martsenyuk 2021; Martsenyuk et al. 2019) – has sought to stop this from happening.

Gender stereotypes also posed internal limits as female combatants appeared to have internalized at least parts of them. Women were hardly immune to the gender stereotypes of war (for one list, see Grytsenko, Kvit, and Martsenyuk 2016, 26–28). This also affected research efforts as I struggled to find female informants willing to speak of their experiences. As noted by Alexievich (2018, xv–xvi), the canon of war is “manly”: “everything we know

about war we know with ‘a man’s voice.’” The immediate implication of this manly canon of war is that men are, to some extent, socialized for combat from early age in ways most women are not (Bourke 1999, 367–68).

The consequence of the gender stereotypes was evident in the strongly gendered division of labor in Ukraine; fighting was manly, and domestic duties womanly. These perceptions influenced the trajectories of female combatants, with even some of the female veterans who served in volunteer battalions appearing to think that it was only natural to keep women away from combat. This division of labor was even reflected in casualty figures. While women constituted 3.5 percent of those recognized as combat participants, they only constitute 1 percent of combat participants with disabilities (Martsenyuk et al. 2019, 42).

While there were many women who served in combat roles during the war, most female volunteers interviewed – including Anna and Kamila – served in medical battalions that played a crucial, yet nevertheless supporting role in the war. For them the choice of joining a medical battalion appeared obvious. Kamila described herself as a hippie before the Maidan and the influence of the Spirit of 2014. In the aftermath of the revolution, the escalation of the conflict left her no choice but to try to contribute to the war effort. She never seriously considered a combat role, becoming a medic instead. Anna in turn believed she was too slight to be useful in combat, and in any case did not like killing. While she called her medical battalion “demilitarized,” she too operated on the front lines – where many medics occasionally took up arms. It was considered naive to believe that a red cross on a vehicle would offer protection instead of drawing fire.

While any activity on the front lines incurs the same dangers, the members of medical battalions were often viewed as noncombatants. In case of injury, they struggled to receive the assistance offered to those who were more easily able to register as combat participants. And if men struggled with wanting societal support after returning from war, women by and large received none. Some veterans noted they experienced a disdain toward uniformed peo-

ple. A few who continued to serve in the armed forces commuted to work in civilian clothes and donned uniforms only when at work. Women again suffered disproportionately. While there was some understanding of the negative effects of war when it came to men, there was limited recognition that women too may have experienced comparable physical and psychological trauma.

Considering all these negative gender stereotypes it is somewhat ironic that Anna spent more time in the war than any of my other informants. She was ceaselessly collecting money for the war and returned to the front as often she could. She helped evacuate dozens of wounded combatants and civilians from harm's way. She has even treated wounded enemy combatants. Yet, at least in part because of gender stereotypes, Anna perhaps felt compelled to be a role model. She had to be exemplary, and always to do more. Especially after witnessing the death of one of her comrades, Anna struggled with a profound feeling of inadequacy. She remained staunch in her belief that Ukraine must win the war. In the absence of victory, she felt she was personally not doing enough. Like Sergey, Anna thus felt tied to a material and social force beyond her control. For her, the war fought against Russia in Donbas was just a continuation of "the same shit" – as was the Russian invasion of February 2022. For the past generations in Anna's family – and for Ukraine – the courses of history had been harsh. But if not for people like her, Ukraine's future would appear bleaker.

Foreigners Who Fight Their Own Wars

Victory Day on May 9 was filled with irony for Alpha, a Finnish volunteer. Waging war against Russia in a Ukrainian regiment often portrayed as fascist, Alpha stood among the guard of honor at a Soviet war monument that celebrated the victory of Soviet war veterans over Nazi Germany. To add to the irony, his grandfathers had fought against the Soviets in the 1939–40 Winter War – and possibly participated in the annihilation of the Ukrainian 44th Rifle Division that Stalin sent to invade Finland. Like some other

foreign volunteers with military backgrounds, Alpha continued to hold fast to his view that his duties in Ukraine were the same he was expected to perform back home in case of war. In fact, he found it preferable to fight Russians in Ukraine and to stop their advance westward there. Even in the absence of authorization and recognition by his own government, Alpha felt a personal responsibility to do something about the situation where a grave injustice was once again committed by a greater power against a smaller one.

The case of Alpha and other foreign volunteers complicates the traditional view of war as a struggle between nations and nation-states. Perceiving this war as solely one between Ukraine and Russia not only neglects important internal dimensions of the conflict but also some of the external ones. Crowdsourcing and state support came from abroad. The war in Donbas and especially the defense of Ukraine against the large-scale Russian invasion in the spring of 2022 also attracted combatants not only from diasporas but also people like Alpha, who essentially brought the war of his grandparents against Russia to Ukraine.

In Western media the foreigners' war in Donbas has typically been connected with struggles back home. Often described in public debates as extremists, these volunteers were compared to those who chose to fight for Islamic State (see, for example, Soufan Center 2019). Foreigners who joined the Kurdish forces that fought against Islamic State were treated with more sympathy, while several Westerners who sided with the separatists in Donbas have been imprisoned. For some commentators, the war in Donbas has been nothing short of a training ground for the extreme right (Hume 2019), if not an ample source of arms for them. Few of these considerations were discussed in 2022–23. Overall, the treatment of foreign volunteers that fought on the Ukrainian side after 2022 was much more positive than in 2014.

Unlike Ukrainians and some Russians, most Western volunteers who participated in the war in Donbas lacked social ties to Ukraine. Many were motivated by nationalist views. Several foreign volunteers interviewed described how they were drawn to

the conflict because of the ethos expressed by Dmytro Yarosh – the head of Right Sector – in a sleek and dramatic video posted on YouTube during the Maidan protests. According to Yarosh, the nationalist “Reconquista” and “the revival of Europe” started with the revolution in Ukraine (Ivanyk 2014). While this echoed many common themes of the extreme right, the European movements were nevertheless divided over the war in Ukraine. Those who looked up to Putin favored the separatists, whereas others who saw Ukraine as the victim of Russian aggression sympathized with Ukraine. The upshot was that people with similarly extreme political views thus ended up fighting with each other – often alongside people one would have expected them to oppose instead.

Several of these foreign volunteers who fought in the war in Donbas remained suspicious of attempts to reach out to them, even after introductions from common acquaintances. In one extreme case a volunteer contacted me with demands to hear what I knew of him after another volunteer inadvertently mentioned him to me. Considering the stakes involved with being identified, this was hardly surprising. Likely self-servingly, some claimed that if they had radicalized (as they understood the media, law enforcement agencies, and academia to suggest), this was not because of their experiences in Ukraine, but their subsequent treatment by authorities back home. The way those who fought in Ukraine were treated on their return home varied from country to country. Volunteers from one country describe how they were immediately contacted by security services after returning, despite their best efforts to remain under the radar. In their ensuing meetings the focus was on Russian activities in Ukraine, not the volunteers’ doings. This was appreciated, as was the invitation another volunteer received from what appeared to be an official gathering of genuinely interested officers interested in how “Russians” fight. In another country the secret service was described not only as indifferent but outright clueless about the war in Donbas as the questions posed appeared to be written for Islamists. While these volunteers emphasized their willingness to cooperate against Russia, they felt the authorities saw them as nothing more than domestic

terror threats. A few war crime investigations targeted foreigner volunteers, especially those who had bragged about war stories and kill counts in public. The difficulty of gathering evidence during an ongoing war nevertheless meant that it was challenging to procure the evidence necessary for prosecution.

Terror designations effectively ruled out some future prospects for those who fought in Ukraine. Several foreign volunteers with military backgrounds were subsequently kicked out of their national militaries. Some may have been able to keep themselves under the radar and fight in Ukraine during leaves of absence (Rękawek 2023, 113). In one case the mere mention of a serving soldier's interest in traveling to Ukraine to fight resulted in an investigation by military intelligence, which led to discharge. Ironically, the discharge came with six months of salary, which the former serviceman used to finance his journey to enlist in Ukraine. Another foreign volunteer felt that it was impossible to find any employment after his identity was revealed by the media – which furthermore labeled him a neo-Nazi. On returning home, even those volunteers with military backgrounds were often shunned by veterans of the armed forces they once served. The returnees who sought psychological help soon found themselves alone with their war-related traumas. While veterans and perhaps refugees could benefit from programs, those who sought war out of their own volition felt isolated. In this sense the foreigners' degree of voluntariness also correlates with state responsibility. Unlike Ukrainian volunteers who could at least in theory apply for benefits, most foreign volunteers – including nationalists from Russia who fought on the separatist side (Yudina and Verkhovsky 2019, 744) – could expect little more than a visit from concerned authorities back home.

Foreigners were subject to a Ukrainian 90-day tourist visa regime, which required them to leave Ukraine before re-entering. Ukrainian volunteers viewed their service with gratitude – Georgians especially contributed to building up military institutions – but several also admitted that they were uncertain about the foreigners' motivations. Not unlike some Ukrainian volunteers, sev-

eral foreigners clearly came for personal reasons, such as adventure, salvation, and reinvention of themselves (Peterson 2015). According to Alpha, the main thing the foreigners in his unit shared was a death wish. The interpretation that foreign volunteers were loose cannons with little to live for back home led some Ukrainian volunteers to wonder whether many of the foreigners could just as well have fought on the separatist side. However, this interpretation was criticized by other foreign volunteers. While they primarily saw the war in Donbas as an opportunity to experience heroism and warfare firsthand – a rare opportunity last provided by the wars in the Balkans in the 1990s – they objected to the notion that this made them immoral. With very few exceptions, it was unimaginable for them to fight on the Russian side. Yet neither did this mean that they fought the same war as their Ukrainian comrades. The foreigners could pack their rucksacks and leave whenever they wanted. This absence of social embeddedness to the war offered a glaring contrast to the Ukrainian volunteers, with whom they often had a hard time communicating. While the Ukrainians may not have been interested in the war, the war was interested in them.

Western media focus on foreigners no doubt contributed to the reputation of the Azov Battalion, which included a small unit for international volunteers. As tends to be the case with wars, most foreigners involved came from the region, especially Belarus and Russia. For those from the region the stakes were not only more personal but also higher. While Western volunteers could return home and, at worst, face interrogation, others risked prison (Antonova 2015). Some burned their passports, which in any case may have expired. Many Russian volunteers in particular cut ties to their country of origin and even their family. The Ukrainian government was slow to honor its promise to grant citizenship to those foreigners who had risked their lives for Ukraine. According to several informants this led to Russian volunteers taking their own lives. Several Chechen volunteers were assassinated. Russian volunteer battalion fighters warrant further investigation, as do those Russians who did not take up arms but who nevertheless

left for Ukraine as Russia's role in instigating the conflict became clear. With political dissidence in Russia suppressed, the Maidan suggested that hope glimmered in Ukraine. And if political progress was possible in Ukraine, perhaps it was possible even in Russia (Gessen 2018, 421–24)?

Lack of language proficiency limited the roles of foreigners from outside the region and contributed to bad communication. Omega, another foreign volunteer, described the resulting “attitude problems” as follows: Ukrainians got annoyed whenever foreigners did something stupid when on leave, whereas foreigners in general felt underappreciated. Omega offers himself as proof of how these problems could be managed. While other foreigners sat idle and frustrated in their base, he joined Ukrainian volunteers in various missions. Nevertheless, Omega was an exception. Very few Western foreigners stayed in Ukraine for long, let alone continued to serve in the battalions or the armed forces. After the second Minsk agreement it became more difficult for foreigners to join the war. Even Azov, the best-known way for foreigners to join the war, stopped coveting foreigners (Colborne 2022, 125). That said, many foreign volunteers returned in 2022. Those interviewed simply contacted their former comrades and rejoined units like Azov instead of applying to the International Legion for the Defense of Ukraine. Their greater relative agency in comparison to most Ukrainian soldiers meant they could arrive, stay as long as they wanted, and then leave. Their fates were not tied to the war and its outcome to the extent the fate of many Ukrainians was. Without criticizing the support the volunteers provided to Ukraine's defense, the participation of some could be understood as war tourism and the safest possible way to personally experience war.

The role played by the foreign volunteers adds nuance to the strictly national framing of the conflict as one between Ukraine and Russia. Bringing their own wars with them, the foreign volunteers exemplify the myriad reasons why people mobilize for war. It is notable that, compared to Ukrainians who may well have experienced both pull and push factors, foreigners came closer to an

ideal type of volunteer. Many of them invested significant sums to travel to Ukraine, some repeatedly. After 2022 some managed to crowdsource support in their native countries, typically through social media or association with non-governmental organizations that collected and delivered assistance to Ukraine.

While foreigners may have fought in Ukraine, for most of them the consequences of war needed to be dealt with in their home societies after their return. While some found new public roles as Ukraine veterans in their home countries, for many the only thing they could show for their service in Ukraine was a cheap medal, if they ever even received it. Ultimately, the only worth of such medals is in the meaning provided by the granting authority. With most foreign volunteers lacking social ties to Ukraine before or after the war, the medal possessed no deeper significance. Whereas their Ukrainian comrades had participated in creating the Ukraine on whose behalf they fought, many foreigners struggled to make sense of their war in Donbas and peaceful life at home after. Time will tell if the situation is different for those who fought after 2022.

CHAPTER 3

The War That Never Was

Setting the Stage

In Ukraine, as in most other parts of Europe, the possibility of war in the second decade of the 21st century was considered remote, if not unthinkable. Many Ukrainians asked what the point of fighting war in this day and age was in the first place. Admittedly, there were divisions in Ukrainian society, but this is true of all societies. And indeed, while some saw that these divides would need to be dealt with in the future, war was by and large not considered the answer. Not even Vladimir Putin, president of Ukraine's mighty neighbor, was expected to resort to large-scale violence. Or so many of us thought. As Fedir, a Ukrainian academic, put it, "We all really didn't believe that something like this can happen." Nonetheless, in the spring of 2014 Ukrainians found themselves at war, with the very existence of their state threatened.

This chapter has three purposes. The first, in the opening two sections, is to provide a brief background on the context that set parameters for strategy, or Ukraine's creation, control, and use of force. The first section focuses on Ukraine as a borderland and an "unexpected nation," which by November 2013 had been steered into a situation where its rulers had to choose between Russia and the West. The dashing of expectations of future progress through closer proximity to the latter contributed to the revolution at the Maidan. The second section focuses on the transition from this revolution to war.

The second purpose of this chapter is to discuss the nature of the war in Ukraine in order to set the stage for the subsequent analysis of the volunteer battalions. While a more general theoretical discussion is necessary for developing theories about this conflict applicable to other cases, it is impossible to comprehend the strategy of any belligerent without understanding how they experienced the situation (Freedman 2013). Even if strategy is understood as balancing ends, means, and ways (Lykke Jr. 1989), different conceptualizations influence how these three are perceived.

When it comes to war, the most central concept to be understood remains war itself. How should we understand the war in Donbas, and how fruitful are our old conceptions of war when trying to make sense of it? The war emerged from a highly polarized and politicized environment, which made distinguishing military from political activity impossible. Furthermore, it took forms that failed to correspond to the expectations of both observers and participants (for a comparative case, see Simpson 2013). The confusion regarding the war in Ukraine closely resembles debates of the early 1990s that followed the Cold War. In both cases observers understood war as transformed, and offered prefixes to war as a solution. With the benefit of hindsight, this solution appears little more than a Band-Aid. Though less common, traditional interstate war remains the theoretical norm of what war is expected to look like. However, even from the perspective of strict conventions and law, the conflict in Donbas was a war that never was. These issues are discussed in three sections that focus on how war is generally understood, the *Sitzkrieg* or phony war the volunteers fought in Donbas, and the consequences of this "war that never was" for its combatants. Finally, the chapter's concluding section provides a sociological analysis of what can be called the Spirit of 2014.

An “Unexpected Nation” at War

For Andrew Wilson, Ukraine is an “unexpected nation,” whose independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 “came as a great surprise.” Ukrainian identity had until then been “developed in other people’s states” (Wilson 2015a, xi–xii). After independence there was an old Ukrainian nation in a young state of Ukraine. This was the first time Ukraine and Ukrainians began to steer their own course. This course was destined to be rocky.

Ukraine’s experience has always “in between”: two variants of Christianity (Orthodox and Catholicism), Europe and Eurasia, Poland and Russia, and different political projects like Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union (Plokhy 2015, 353; Wilson 2015a). Even after the Cold War and independence, decision-makers in Ukraine continued to navigate between East and West. In November 2013 this course led to a crossroads, where they had to choose and favor one at the expense of the other (Malyarenko 2016, 350; Menon and Rumer 2015, 62–64). After years of negotiation, President Viktor Yanukovych abruptly withdrew from association agreement negotiations with the European Union.

Revolutions are often connected to the dashing of expectations of future progress (Payne 2012, 6). Yanukovych’s unexpected maneuver caused frustration among those who believed the only way to escape stagnation was to maintain Ukraine’s future as part of the West, if not to realize full sovereignty from the sway of Moscow (Plokhy 2015, 326, 338). The magnitude of the outcry was nevertheless limited at the outset. After a mere ten days, the protests in Kyiv against Yanukovych’s decision had split into two competing groups – both of which were dwindling (Onuch and Sasse 2016, 566–67). The name EuroMaidan combined the issue at stake – Ukraine’s relationship with Europe, and especially the European Union – and the place – Maidan Nezalezhnosti, or Independence Square. During the Soviet era, the Maidan became a traditional place for political rallies to support the regime. From 1990 the square instead became associated with political protest that authorities dared not crack down on (Yekelchuk 2020, 4–5). From

then on, conflicts between the political elites and the state and its citizens were largely resolved through negotiation (Plokhly 2015, 327–28, 337). On November 30, 2013, the government breached this informal understanding as riot police attacked the few hundred present on the Maidan. This unprecedented government escalation brought hundreds of thousands to the streets of many Ukrainian cities, protesting issues much more fundamental than the future of Ukraine in the wider world. For some, the Maidan was a protest against brutality, corruption, and rule by gangsters. It was a revolt against *proizvol* – a Russian word that combines arbitrariness and tyranny – and for the right to be treated with dignity as human beings instead of objects of someone else’s will (Shore 2017, 40–41).

The crackdown on the EuroMaidan protestors contributed to polarization and the end of ambiguity. In the words of Ivan, a young professional from eastern Ukraine, “black was black and white was white.” Ivan was among those Ukrainians who saw police brutality as the final straw. Perceiving the moment as historical and existential, he was haunted by the idea that his children would later ask him what he did during the Maidan. He could not face the prospect of answering “nothing.” After deciding that he had to leave for Kyiv, he filled his car with other would-be protestors within 30 minutes of announcing on Facebook that he would drive there. By day Ivan worked in the Kyiv office of his company, by night in the Automaidan, a group of volunteers who helped with transporting goods and people to and from what the protestors began to call the “Maidan state.”

The Maidan state was an impressive feat of self-organization. Volunteers built a system to provide everything from security to food, shelter, and warmth for protestors. This logistical effort allowed demonstrations to go on for months despite repression from state security forces and freezing temperatures – which the authorities hoped would force protestors to give up. Ivan’s initial task, for instance, was to haul firewood from Kyiv’s surroundings to the Maidan.

The various functions of the Maidan state depended on coordination, and ultimately a strong feeling of civic momentum. The Maidan thus brought unexpected unity to a divided society. As Anna told me, there was incredible friendship where one “saw someone for the first time and trusted him completely.” The Maidan state also served as a reminder and criticism of the failings of the brutal and corrupt Ukrainian state, which volunteers sought to force to improve. Because the government had already showed its willingness to resort to force, some protestors felt they needed to answer in kind. Offensive use of force involved occupation of government buildings, scuffles with the Berkut, and even deploying homemade catapults. Others perceived it necessary to control the protests, as infiltration by provocateurs could justify a violent crackdown. In case of such a crackdown, the protests also depended on protection provided by self-defense units clad in do-it-yourself armor.

However impressive the Maidan state was, it only lasted for 83 days and, even then, failed to topple the regime through non-violent means alone. On January 16, 2014, parliament passed so-called “dictatorship laws,” revoking both freedom of speech and assembly. From the protestors’ perspective, law had been reduced to a mere instrument of oppression. Some felt that the struggle had already become existential, with the threat of arrest, prosecution, and up to 15 years in prison for participating in the protests, or even for covering their faces. One group of youngsters wearing masks went in front of the oldest prison in Kyiv in an almost carnival atmosphere of clear provocation of the new laws, demanding to be arrested. The laws of January 16 marked the point of no return. Either Yanukovich or the protestors would have to fall.

This was, in any case, the view of many of the more radical protestors, who saw that two months of nonviolent protests had not resulted in any gains. Faced with increasing repression, the opposition leaders who had sought to control the Maidan state failed to show much urgency, neither did they present a credible strategy for toppling the Yanukovich regime. To remedy the situation, the protests were now radicalized. A violent revolutionary

strategy was adopted from below. This resort to violence emphasizes the inherent weakness of the Maidan state when it came to coordinating a sufficiently strong nonviolent strategy. Radical nationalists would play a central role in executing this new strategy due to their revolutionary identity, centralized organizations and expertise and readiness for violent action (Ishchenko 2020; Kudelia 2018; Likhachev 2015).

Soon smoke from burning tires filled the air in central Kyiv. Protestors battled riot police for control of the Maidan until sniper fire erupted on February 20. It was part of this carnage I witnessed the day after on YouTube. The resulting outcry proved too much even for Yanukovych's allies, who distanced themselves from him. Security officials feared for their safety and negotiated a ceasefire with protestors until parliament demobilized the MoIA forces. A day before the sniper fire began, protestors in other cities in central and western Ukraine had occupied police stations and Interior Ministry headquarters. Rumors spread that a large cache of firearms captured in the city of Lviv were being transported to the protestors in Kyiv (Higgins, Kramer, and Erlanger 2014). This may have influenced the willingness of the officials to negotiate: if the arms ended up in the hands of protestors in Kyiv, worse bloodshed would ensue.

The prospect of escalating violence also hastened international efforts to de-escalate and resolve the situation. On February 21 Yanukovych, representatives of the opposition, and several European Union countries and Russia, "Concerned with the tragic loss of life in Ukraine, seeking an immediate end of bloodshed and determined to pave the way for a political resolution of the crisis," signed an agreement on settlement of the political crisis in Ukraine (German Federal Foreign Office 2014). The Russian representative did not arrive to sign the agreement, which also left some Maidan activists disappointed as Yanukovych was not forced to resign.

There was no real need to stipulate Yanukovych's resignation, for his authority evaporated after he signed the agreement. Following the parliamentary decision the day before, his security

forces did not wait for the president's approval before leaving the capitol. Up to 5,000 did so, in part because the agreement called for an investigation into the killing of protestors. Others claimed they were simply left without orders in a situation where the central government was falling apart. After signing the agreement, Yanukovych – whose house some of the protestors had threatened to attack – fled the capital the same evening. Two days later Russia helped him to escape the country (Higgins and Kramer 2015).

What started as a protest against one foreign policy decision left around 150 protestors and police dead and turned into what was later officially dubbed the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine. Yanukovych's unexpected flight left the victorious Maidan protestors shocked and with mixed feelings. It was as difficult to fathom what had happened as what was to come. Some people wept and cried for the fallen. Some shouted and demanded revenge. Some rejoiced and felt victorious. What united many was the shared faith that it was now possible to build a better society without corruption and police brutality.

Yet, more immediately, the revolution had required blood, divided the society, and left a vacuum of political authority. In Kyiv this vacuum was filled by those opposed to Yanukovych, whose resort to violence had made the protestors who flocked to the Maidan question his legitimacy. More precisely, the revolution saw not the protestors, but established opposition politicians gain power in the first government of Arseniy Yatsenyuk. Especially in eastern Ukraine, others viewed the revolution as nothing more than a violent coup d'état. These views were only further polarized by the visible and vocal roles Ukrainian nationalists associated with the far right played on the Maidan (Ishchenko 2016; Matveeva 2018, 80–81). The notion of a coup questioned the legitimacy of Ukrainian political institutions altogether. Some of these institutions, especially the police, virtually disappeared during the days after the revolution as officers were afraid of being associated with the old government and the killing of protestors. Others were uncertain whether they should be associated with the new government either. Nevertheless, the result was not chaos and disorder.

Emboldened and empowered by months of grassroots activism, in many places state institutions were replaced from below, for instance when locals organized themselves to protect their homes and communities.

Within a few weeks of the protests over 500 statues of Lenin were toppled in the de-Sovietization process dubbed "Leninopad" (Kravchenko 2015; Törnquist-Plewa and Yurchuk 2019, 705). Some participants continue to maintain that the history of modern Ukraine only started with this revolution. At the same time, the revolution stimulated opposition as others in the Crimean Peninsula and the eastern parts of the country distanced themselves from the new government in Kyiv, which they – following Russian propaganda – accused of fascism. The new government's hurried repeal of a law protecting minority languages did not help the situation, as this was widely understood to prohibit the use of the Russian language in Ukraine (Malyarenko 2016, 351). Polarization allowed previously marginal ideas such as clear-cut separatism to gain influence. The downfall of Yanukovych thus marked the beginning, not the end, of the struggle over Ukraine's future course.

Mere days after Yanukovych's escape and while both the new rulers in Kyiv and the world looked on, Crimea was occupied by Russia's so-called "little green men." Despite public statements from Moscow denying deployment of these unmarked masked soldiers or any plans to occupy Crimea, Russia nevertheless annexed the peninsula after a hasty and questionable referendum (Yurchak 2014). The events in Crimea transpired rapidly and unexpectedly at a time when the dust from the Maidan fallout was still settling, and when much was in flux in Kyiv. Many Ukrainians sought normalcy and stability beyond what they experienced under Yanukovych. According to Tosya, a Kyiv resident and a Maidan protestor, "when Yanukovych left, many were relieved. Some simply because the subway would work on schedule." Days felt like hours, filled with funerals and commemoration of the "Heavenly Hundred," the protestors killed in the revolution who were now deemed martyrs. For Tosya, until the occupation of Crimea, "much was uncer-

tain. [Then] the war started and gradually everything became as certain as before, but, you know, in a bad way.”

The Russian occupation and annexation of Crimea marked the start of a “Russian spring” that suggested similar secession was possible elsewhere, especially in eastern Ukraine. This was no idle threat for the new government in Kyiv. The new rulers struggled to employ the means of the state that had been hollowed out by years of corruption and mismanagement. The revolution had also politicized the security forces, some of whom had taken the side of the revolutionaries while others had opposed it. In an uncertain situation, many chose to wait and see how things would develop.

In this increasingly polarized context, the situation escalated out of control. Russia in fact later gave out medals “For the Return of Crimea,” dating the start of the operation to February 20, 2014, when Yanukovich was still in power. On March 1, and while Crimea was occupied, Yanukovich begged Putin to “to use the armed forces of the Russian Federation to re-establish the rule of law, peace, order, stability and to protect the people of Ukraine” (Charbonneau 2014). After the declaration of Crimea’s independence on March 16 and its incorporation into Russia two days later, some Russians who had supported separatism moved to eastern Ukraine. Crowds in the east demonstrated and marched, disarming police stations while demoralized security officials tried to restore order. Protestors occupied administration buildings, replacing Ukrainian blue and yellow flags with the Russian tricolor. According to Vitaly Yarema, the first deputy prime minister of Ukraine, a total of 242,000 people participated in 320 pro-Russian actions in Ukraine between the end of February and the start of April (Euromaidan Press 2014a). While it remains unclear how this information was collected, one could assume that the government had an interest in deflating rather than inflating these numbers.

As Ukraine risked disintegration, there was little the government seemed to be able to do. Amid political turmoil the new government inherited a state that was both broke and broken. As Interim President Oleksandr Turchynov later described the

situation, “Our country had neither the government system, nor the defense system back then” (Hladka et al. 2017, 30; see also Ploky 2018, xvi). Yet if there was one thing people learned since the 2004 and 2014 revolutions, it was that revolution is a process, not an event (Payne 2012, 9). If change was sought, then revolutionaries needed to do it themselves instead of returning home. In fact, many revolutionaries felt indebted to those who had been injured or killed for the revolution (Shore 2017, 123). This sense of responsibility, combined with genuine fear of a Russian invasion, contributed to the mobilization of the so-called volunteer battalions to prevent a similar scenario in Donbas. Perceiving the state as both unable and unwilling to act against separatism, they became the first line of defense for Ukrainian territorial sovereignty – and thus helped the transition from revolution to war.

From Revolution to War

For those gathered at the Maidan, the protests appeared to bring a divided society together, regardless of ethnic, religious, or socio-economic differences. Simultaneously, the revolution deepened other Ukrainian cleavages until the Maidan led Ukraine straight to war. If asked when the war began, many Ukrainians believe it was when the unmarked Russian “little green men” occupied Crimea on February 27, 2014, or February 20, the date given on the official Russian campaign medal “For the Return of Crimea.” Some suggest early April, when armed separatists led by the former Russian intelligence officer Igor Girkin captured the city of Sloviansk in Donetsk. Yet the longer the discussion carries on, the further back the beginning of the war stretches. Russia had been preparing to annex Crimea for years. Russian information operations had targeted mainland Ukraine for even longer, sowing division in the society of post-independence Ukraine (Hladka et al. 2017, 50). The official Ukrainian historiography even explains the millions who starved to death during the Holodomor in 1932–33 as a genocidal attempt by the Soviet leadership to wipe out “the Ukrainian nation” (Holodomor Victims Memorial 2019).

From the perspective of many Ukrainian nationalists, the events of spring 2014 thus only marked the start of physical warfare in a much longer war. The way several interviewees claim the war began with the beating of the EuroMaidan protestors on November 30, 2013, suggests that they consider the war and the revolution to constitute parts of the same struggle for the Ukrainian nation. Indeed, what was at stake for many of the volunteers interviewed was not mere territory but Ukrainian nationhood. Yet, for some, war meant redemption. A shared external threat in the east would mend societal divisions. The revolution promised that a divided borderland, forced to navigate between greater powers, could break free and at last forge its own destiny. More immediately, society would rise and unite to defend the revolution's hard-won gains. For many the revolution marked the end of stasis and the beginning of modern Ukraine as an independent and modern – repeatedly called “normal” – state.

The Maidan protestors reflected on past mistakes committed in the Orange Revolution of 2004 and drew two main lessons. First, people learned their potential political power. Second, they understood they could not delegate responsibility for reforms to others, especially politicians, who had squandered the gains of the Orange Revolution (Shore 2017, 28). At that time, the revolutionaries failed to take advantage of initial successes; they soon demobilized and got on with their lives, and the revolution's aims were never implemented. As Andrew Wilson (2015a, 322) succinctly summarizes, “taken together, the old guard survived, returned and prospered ... many came to regret that the Orange Revolution was not a bit more revolutionary.” It is important, however, to note that when the protests began in 2004 or 2013, they did not necessarily aim at a revolution. Framing them later as such raised expectations of rapid reform. This influenced the events that followed. For instance, the regret about the outcomes of the Orange Revolution contributed to more radical demands for reform a decade later.

The experience of the Maidan also further eroded trust in party politics. Opposition to both political and state structures led

to the realization that the people themselves would have to initiate change. The sacrifices made in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, memorialized in the martyrdom of the Heavenly Hundred, made it difficult to simply let go. It became necessary to hold politicians accountable, to continue the revolution through reforms, so that the sacrifices had not been made in vain.

These experiences led many of the Maidan activists to mobilize against separatism. What complicated matters, however, was that the result of the Maidan was not merely a change of elites in Kyiv. Revolutions – overturning social relations – build on the breakdown of state authority, as politics are taken from elites by the masses below (Smith 2017, 5). Bringing politics to the streets of Kyiv culminated in violence.

Bringing politics to the street is nevertheless not enough for a revolution because the breakdown of state authority is rarely the direct consequence of mass mobilization. As Stephen Kotkin (2015, 166) has argued, “revolution results not from determined crowds in the streets but from elite abandonment of the existing political order.” The Maidan Revolution encouraged politicization and then filled the resulting vacuum in Western Ukraine and the seat of government in Kyiv until the flight of Yanukovich. While the revolutionaries owned the streets of the capital and several other cities in western Ukraine, the revolution also contributed to a new vacuum of political authority in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. In these areas many had voted Yanukovich, and now perceived the revolution as a violent coup d'état. Regional security officials – especially the returning Berkut who had battled revolutionaries in Kyiv – either stayed neutral, or supported anti-Maidan protests (Hladka et al. 2017, 61, 64–65, 67; Kofman et al. 2017, 21). Violence polarized previously ambiguous views toward the least common denominators. While no one knew what would happen next, the visible presence of previously fringe right-wing nationalists who demanded radical Ukrainization policies at Maidan and the re-emergence of Second World War-era nationalist imagery and slogans (Yekelchuk 2020, 95) did little to alleviate fear in predominantly Russian-speaking areas (Ishchenko

2016; Malyarenko 2016; Matsuzato 2016). To make things worse, Right Sector – an alliance of nationalist groups that had emerged at Maidan and who openly used the red and black standard of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists whom the Soviet Union had labeled as fascists – threatened to lead a “friendship train” to Crimea in order to protect Ukrainian sovereignty. This implication of use of force by non-state actors presaged the way volunteer battalions continued to influence conflict dynamics. When Kamila and other pro-Ukrainian activists tried to travel to Crimea to assess the situation, they were stopped by armed men at a checkpoint ostensibly erected in response to such threats. She was sent back to mainland Ukraine – but not before her hair was shaved.

The Maidan raised violence as the main issue of Ukrainian politics. Violence led to fear, especially regarding Crimea, and directly contributed to the Russian occupation and annexation of the peninsula. When the Russian “little green men” arrived in the early hours of February 27, many Crimeans welcomed them. Domestic factors can explain this support for Russia. Crimea’s population was overwhelmingly Russophone and included a sizable ethnic Russian minority. As Yanukovich’s Party of Regions competed for the same voters with these ethnic Russian parties, the latter’s activities had been curbed during Yanukovich’s rule. Yanukovich had not trusted the indigenous Crimean elites, and sidelined them with his own trustees from Donetsk. Spurred by widespread anti-Maidan opinion, the indigenous elites bypassed the Yanukovich trustees who tried to de-escalate the political situation. The indigenous Crimean elites appear to have been more willing to secede to Russia, than the Kremlin to take them: they had to make sure that Russia was ready to annex Crimea, not the other way around (Matsuzato 2016).

On February 28 the newly appointed Ukrainian interim president Oleksandr Turchynov chaired a National Security and Defense Council meeting that offers a sober picture of the challenges faced by the new government. The publicized minutes of the meeting deserve to be discussed in length (shorter snip-

pets and Turchynov's assessment of the situation can be found in Hladka et al. 2017, 28–31; for the full transcript from which the citations are taken, see Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council 2016). The council noted a coordinated effort of "separatism, which is artificially supported and spread on the territory of Ukraine," but which nevertheless enjoyed "massive support ... by locals." In fact, the council noted that "the majority of the Crimean population is pro-Russian, anti-Ukrainian." In this situation, the council felt that resorting to force would only justify Russian military action. To make matters worse, it was far from certain that the armed forces would execute such orders, if given. Several security officials resigned; many were considered treasonous, and some had already defected to the Russian side. The Russian commander of the Black Sea Fleet promised that if Ukrainians did not resist, there would be no bloodshed. He also said that they were prepared to "go to the end." In addition to the 20,000 Russian soldiers in Crimea, there were a further 38,000 across the Ukrainian–Russian border. There was no army after Yanukovich's systematic destruction of the armed forces. Full-scale war was not an option: Russian forces would have been able to reach Kyiv by the evening. The council also recognized the political nature of the problem. If law and order were not followed and Maidan activists continued to occupy state buildings, those opposed to the Maidan would do the same. No other country was ready to offer military assistance. Both Americans and Germans pleaded with the government to de-escalate the situation.

The interim government thus faced what was likely to be the first post-independence test of Ukrainian statehood: Ukraine had to prove it could maintain monopoly of force in its territory. It did not pass this test in Crimea, failing to defend its territorial sovereignty against encroaching Russia. Russia faced no military resistance from Ukraine. Ukrainian servicemen who wanted to defend the peninsula were largely left without orders, fully aware that opening fire on the unmarked Russian soldiers would have grave consequences. Not only would armed resistance amount to suicide but it would potentially mean a declaration of war and a

full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. Splits within Crimea also became apparent while considering the fate of its security forces – most of which were locally recruited due to Crimea’s autonomous status. It was later revealed that 24,182 members of the Ukrainian military and law enforcement agencies on the peninsula (83.3 percent of their total number) chose to remain under the new Russian rule (Stasyuk 2018, 92). This decision to remain was more applicable to the police than the military: out of 20,315 soldiers, 6,010 – just under 30 percent – returned to Ukraine after the Russian annexation (Ukrinform 2016).

With the lack of local resistance, it is possible that Russian decision-makers were encouraged to continue exploiting Ukrainian weakness (Kofman et al. 2017, 30–31). Russian media tried to describe the annexation of Crimea as the beginning of a “Russian spring” comparable to the Prague Spring of 1968 or the Arab Spring of 2011; what made the comparison ironic was that Russia hardly offered a more liberal alternative. This was not lost on the Kremlin. Fearful of popular uprisings, it used other ideologies to legitimize the subsequent insurgency in Donbas (Laruelle 2016). The annexation nevertheless indicated that similar secession was possible elsewhere in post-revolutionary Ukraine.

Depending on whether one was for or against the Maidan, the Russian support for separatism was interpreted in opposite ways. Those who saw the revolution as a coup d’état welcomed this support (Kudelia 2016; Matsuzato 2017), and could find encouragement in both the Russian resolve and the Ukrainian weakness and indecisiveness. The Maidan revolutionaries in turn saw not only threats to the gains of the revolution, but more importantly the unraveling of their country. To some extent the crisis resembled those that characterized Weimar Germany (Weitz 2007; Schmitt 2004) and other European states that emerged from the First World War: even the stability of post-Maidan Ukraine was threatened by insufficient state capacity for asserting political authority over a society which did not accord the interim government full legitimacy, nor recognize its legality. After losing Crimea, the interim government had already proven that it was unable – some

thought unwilling – to defend Ukrainian sovereignty. Society was increasingly polarized between those who sought secession and those who vowed to protect Ukrainian sovereignty from further violations. With the rise of militancy, the upshot was further fear and violence, and inevitably further polarization and erosion of state authority.

The situation was dire. As already noted, the interim president Oleksandr Turchynov later lamented the absence of both the government and defense system at the time. While perhaps impressive on paper, the Ukrainian armed forces appeared hollow. It was estimated that the largest country entirely within Europe, with a population of 45 million and a 130,000-strong military, only possessed 5,000 combat-ready soldiers (Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council 2016). Geared more toward internal than external threats, all security services were furthermore assumed to have been thoroughly infiltrated by Russia. There were no preparations for opposing separatists or Russia. As a result, “no one had any real idea what to do” (Judah 2015, 165).

The circumstances of the annexation of Crimea were unique, as was the lack of Ukrainian response to the “little green men.” What worked in Crimea did not in the east. Firstly, the element of surprise tends to work only once. In addition, Donbas was historically deemed more important for Ukraine, and support for separatism was more lukewarm there, both among local elites and the general population. A poll conducted in Donbas in April 2014 showed that while support for separatism was higher than in other regions of mainland Ukraine, just 29 percent of the respondents were in favor of separatism; 52 percent opposed and 15 percent were uncertain. Ethnic Russians, who constituted a third of the population, were more in favor of separatism, with 45 percent favoring, 33 percent opposing, and 17 percent uncertain. As even ethnic Russians did not support separatism wholeheartedly, the poll results did not allow equating ethnic identities with diametrically opposed political preferences (Giuliano 2018).

Accounts favorable to the revolutionaries portray the resulting rise of the society to defend Ukrainian sovereignty as state-

led and orderly (Hladka et al. 2017; Stasyuk 2018). In reality, this mobilization was often done *despite* the state, which early on hindered rather than helped the process. The Crimean occupation led many volunteers to perceive the state as part of the problem, not the solution. The military especially contributed to these negative views of the state. While lines of eager volunteers formed in front of military recruitment commissariats, outdated formal, often Soviet-era practices and laws stopped many from enlisting. Others who managed to enlist were sent home to await mobilization orders. These orders did not always come. Each passing day saw escalating anti- and pro-Maidan protests in the east. With state inaction, fear and frustration grew. Early on, most of those who felt a pressing need to fight to protect Ukrainian sovereignty had no choice but to mobilize outside the state purview. Even some soldiers left ranks to counter rising separatism as part of volunteer battalions. The only means to oppose the separatism deemed to threaten Ukraine came from an increasingly polarized society, and especially from those who had steered Ukraine to its now perilous new course. This was the context out of which the volunteer battalions arose.

Contemporary War

In classic military theory, war constitutes a human activity which reflects the broader contexts where it is waged (Howard 2002). As social contexts are constantly changing, so too is war. This was, for instance, the case in the early 1990s, with the end of the Cold War and the ripples that followed. While even during the Cold War the ratio between traditional interstate wars and those not fitting this category had been skewed toward the seemingly novel intrastate conflicts, the end of the threat of major war on the one hand and the increase of these other kinds of wars on the other suggested that war had either reverted to a premodern type, or transformed into an unprecedented model. The attempts to understand these seemingly new realities often resulted in new prefixes being added to war (Duyvesteyn and Ångström 2005). Scholars of strategy

nevertheless soon questioned the utility of these prefixes. For instance, James Gow (2003) demonstrated how even seemingly irrational acts of violence against civilians could form a part of premeditated strategy to achieve rather traditional political ends. From the perspective of strategic studies, war as a phenomenon remained largely unchanged from the way Clausewitz had defined it in the early 19th century (Smith 2005).

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the war in Ukraine was not its perceived novelty, but how closely the debates about the war resembled those of the 1990s. For example, an excellent book that scrutinized the new realities after the Cold War was Martin van Creveld's *Transformation of War* (1991). Despite its sharp observations, van Creveld's book suffered from bad timing and misdirected criticism. It was understandably not popular to portray Western state militaries as irrelevant in the first place, and especially when these forces had just scored an easy victory against Iraq in the First Gulf War. On a more theoretical level, van Creveld's and several of his contemporaries' criticism of Clausewitz appeared misplaced (Smith 2005). Nevertheless, the crux of van Creveld's argument was sound. Changed circumstances required conventions and ideas about war to be updated (Van Creveld 1991, 92). The confusion caused by the war in Ukraine implied that such updating had not been successful, and that our understandings of war and strategy had in some respects not significantly evolved since the early 1990s.

Limiting violence is a precondition for social life in all societies. To date, ridding society of violence altogether has nevertheless proven difficult, although not for want of trying. The best example of this comes in the form of states, famously defined by Weber as social organizations that claim the monopoly on violence within their territory (Waters and Waters 2015). State authority in democracies depends on consent and rule of law, with monopoly of force contributing to the latter. That said, even democracies and especially authoritarian leaders ultimately rely on coercion to ensure their subjects submit to their will. States and the elites who lead them justify their existence through protection of their

subjects, not only from domestic threats but especially from other states. Violence thus remains a cornerstone of social life in both domestic and international spheres (Malešević 2017). As a result, legitimizing some forms and uses of violence and delegitimizing others remains crucial. Collective violence needs to be legitimized, whereas private violence in other circumstances must be curtailed for social life to continue.

How then is violence restricted in practice? Nonviolence at home requires monopolizing legitimate use of violence, but also the capacity for external violence. One way for separating acceptable forms of violence from unacceptable ones has been the invention of peace and, by corollary, war. Peace is often defined through the absence of war. Traditionally, war in turn is defined by four attributes: wars concern organized violence between collectives, not individuals; wars are waged against foreigners, and hence between rather than within collectives; wars describe a rule-governed activity; and, finally, times of war must be distinguishable from times of peace (Neff 2008, 15).

The core problem with this understanding of war is its assumption of an inseparable link between war and that the collectives that wage it are states. While van Creveld recognized that it was arbitrary to define war through the state as the state-centric variant of war was only one of the many forms war could assume (Van Creveld 1991, 57–58), he nevertheless demanded that to qualify as a war it was necessary to separate combatants from noncombatants and to adhere to law. Although van Creveld recognized that written law was a relatively new phenomenon and hence that law was equal to norms and conventions, there could be no war without law (Van Creveld 1991, 92–93). In fact, law has become so embedded in the concept of war that war has become, first and foremost, a legal institution (Kennedy 2006; Neff 2008).

From the perspective of law, both war and peace and combatant and noncombatant form binary conditions. It should not be surprising that these kinds of rigidly defined dichotomies always contain gray areas between them. This was the case with the “mother of all wars,” the Second World War, which led to mas-

sive partisan mobilization and the extermination of millions of civilians. Anthropologists have noted the prevalence of domestic “no peace, no war” situations, which have often appeared more as the norm than the exception (Richards 2005). Neither does civil strife, including in the colonies, count as real war (Barkawi 2016). Frozen conflicts offer only one comparable interstate example. In the same manner, in Ukraine the absence of a declaration of war and the indistinct nature of some of the belligerents contributed to ambiguity and to notions of the conflict as a new kind of war.

The novelty of the war in Donbas is nevertheless debatable. One assessment of the conflict was that “Ukraine is a case study not in pioneering new nonlinear approaches but in the failure of hybrid warfare to deliver the desired political ends for Russia” (Kofman et al. 2017, 70). Russia had waged “war without war and occupation without occupation in the Russian sphere of influence” (Dunn and Bobick 2014), in a manner which raised the question of whether the dichotomies and the international regulation of organized violence have become so restrictive that affairs between states too have been conducted in ways that helped their leaders avoid some of the obligations of both peace and war. Nondeclaration of war is also more prevalent than declaration. For instance, the United States has only ever formally declared five wars (Freedman 2012), the last time against Romania on June 4, 1942, during the Second World War. The distinction between combatants and noncombatants too has become unclear. To give only one example, enemy populations became targets of strategic bombing and extermination in the Second World War, after which some of them began to resist and fight back (Van Creveld 1991, 79). Targeted killings have required drawing – and often crossing – boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate targets (Bergman 2018).

This kind of failure to adhere to the laws of war was explained through the transformation of war itself in modern times. For van Creveld, war as traditionally understood had no future. Faced with the onslaught of low-intensity conflicts that did not correspond to traditional idea of interstate war, modern military forces lacked utility: as van Creveld put it, they are “about as relevant to

war in our age as Don Quixote was in his” (Van Creveld 1991, 30). A decade and a half later, Rupert Smith (2008, 3) continued the same argument, if only slightly less provocatively: “War as cognitively known to most non-combatants, war as battle in a field between men and machinery, war as a massive deciding event in a dispute in international affairs: Such war no longer exists.”

While van Creveld clearly went too far with his hyperbole, it is more difficult to refute Smith’s observation of an altered utility of force. Although the large-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 offers evidence to the contrary, the typical goals of contemporary warfare have, regardless, shifted from simply eradicating enemy armed forces to establishing a political condition. While force could capture territory, for instance, it is difficult to see how violence alone could deliver political goals like establishing democracy on this captured territory. Just as important, this entails a different sequence than peace–crisis–war–resolution, with the conceptualization of war as a disruption of peace that has a clear beginning and end. As Smith argues, “there is no pre-defined sequence, but rather a continuous crisscrossing between confrontation and conflict” (Smith 2008, 183–84). As a result, it is not always possible to distinguish military force from other, inherently political activities (Simpson 2013). Further evidence of this comes from historical lessons of counterinsurgency (Ucko 2012), the more recent notions of hybrid warfare, and the 4:1 “correlation of nonmilitary and military measures” attributed to the Russian chief of the general staff, General Valery Gerasimov (Bartles 2016, 35), which all mix organized violence with nonmilitary means.

Smith also observed that because war sought to establish a political condition and because war was no longer expected to be waged at home, its contemporary version was “war amongst the people.” While he recognized that in many cases adversaries “are not only of the people but are fighting amongst them to attack the occupier and also to establish a dominant position at least locally for their own faction or ethnic group,” Smith still saw that they could be “separated from the people” (Smith 2008, 278–86). This

possibility of separating enemies from the people suggests that Smith largely perceived “the people” as little more than a target and a terrain. Here Smith – a British officer – clung to past ideas of engagement despite having served in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. Assuming that combatants can be separated from noncombatants allows the bypassing of obvious questions concerning human relations in these conflicts, as well as the social embeddedness of adversaries. As this investigation of the volunteer battalions and the war they waged in Donbas illustrates, not asking such questions risks leading to a simplified understanding of war and the context it is waged in. What becomes blatantly clear is how the war in Donbas was not merely fought “amongst the people,” but more importantly both *by* and *between* the people. This had two immediate effects: first, the further muddying of what this war amounted to; second, the centrality of political and sociological factors in this war. Both influenced how the volunteers who mobilized to the war experienced it.

The Sitzkrieg

For many members of the volunteer battalions interviewed for this study, the Maidan Revolution and the war in Donbas were merely the continuation of the same struggle. Yet as Andrew Wilson (2016) has argued, the revolution would not have escalated into war without active Russian involvement. Without Russia, Crimea would not have seceded, nor would separatists inspired by the various ideas of Novorossiia have flocked to eastern Ukraine. Even if these points were contested – and they are – the Russian military intervention was necessary to prevent the combined Ukrainian forces from regaining control of eastern Ukraine from separatists in August 2014 (Malyarenko 2016; Sakwa 2015; Wilson 2016; Yekelchuk 2020). Yet it is equally important to observe that Russia did not act in a vacuum. As demonstrated by the Russian success in occupying Crimea and failure in doing the same in eastern Ukraine, domestic factors mattered. Yet what some describe as the Kremlin’s almost obsessive association of internal

unrest to external meddling appears to have found its equivalent in Ukrainian thinking (Freedman 2019). Despite evidence of important local grievances behind the conflict (Arel and Driscoll 2023; Matsuzato 2017; Matveeva 2018; Uehling 2023; Wilson 2016), the official Ukrainian view that the war was one against Russia served to diminish the importance of any domestic factors in the conflict.

During the last days of the Maidan, it was revealed that Yanukovich was preparing an ATO to grant security agencies – including the armed forces – widespread powers to act against protestors (Woods 2014). This act of desperation came too late, as the Yanukovich regime was already crumbling. Two months later, on April 13, the interim government that replaced Yanukovich took a cue from him and declared an ATO against the now-armed separatists in the east, who in turn called the new government an illegitimate junta. This rhetoric is typical in its denial of the opponent's political legitimacy. Criminalizing the separatists as illegitimate terrorists suggested that violence remained the only available means in the conflict – calling the government a junta that they too were illegitimate. As Avakov explained, “if faced with armed resistance of Russian saboteurs, we had to liquidate the threat as negotiations with the terrorists were impossible and unacceptable” (quoted in Hladka et al. 2017, 65. This, and quotes from Avakov that follow have been approved by his deputy Anton Herashchenko). At the same time, the official view in Kyiv was that there was no war, nor would there be one. While the terrorist label was perhaps also meant to de-escalate the conflict with Russia, aside from serving to delegitimize the political grievances of those critical of the revolution, it also muddied the official narrative of an interstate war by suggesting that the threat came from domestic criminals, rather than from the military of another state. The kind of war discussed in rhetoric thus never truly materialized in reality.

There were several reasons as to why the declaration of war never came. Some were already apparent by the end of February 2014, when the National Security and Defense Council convened to discuss the escalating situation in Crimea. Reeling from the Maidan Revolution that had collapsed political authority in parts

of the country, the new government in Kyiv had neither the financial backing nor the support of its whole population. Years of corruption and neglect – some believe intentional sabotage – of the armed forces meant that they were unprepared for the challenges ahead. In the words of General Viktor Muzhenko, who was nominated as chief of the Ukrainian general staff in July 2014, the armed forces were “literally in ruins, led by Russian generals and security agencies, and totally demoralized” (quoted in Torba 2017).

An open war against the much more powerful Russia would in all likelihood have led to Ukrainian defeat and was to be avoided. Two interviewed members of the Ukrainian parliament also blamed the country’s Western partners for demanding that Ukraine not frame the situation as war, precisely in order to de-escalate the situation. As later described by the Ukrainian minister of foreign affairs Pavlo Klimkin (2019), instead of given assistance to protect its sovereignty, Ukraine was pressed “to engage in ‘dialogue,’ telling us that both sides ‘needed to sit down and talk’ to end the conflict.” Some representatives of these Western partners later recommended that Ukraine should just give up, as it had already lost the war against Russia. Doing so would potentially end sanctions and enable Western countries to restore trade relations with Russia. War was also ubiquitously bad for business, even for Ukraine and Russia. Both domestic and international actors thus wanted to limit the conflict and thought that refraining from calling the situation “war” would de-escalate the situation. However, it was also perceived that it would have been an expensive undertaking for Russia to capture territory with a hostile population. Limiting hostilities by keeping the situation ambiguous thus had multiple rationales and served multiple interests. Ultimately, until February 2022, for all actors the stakes were insufficient for all-out war (Freedman 2019, 48).

If the situation before February 2022 did not amount to war, then what was it about? Absent any declaration of war, then, the war simply never was. The ATO declaration did little to address any of this, and the resulting ambiguity caused a host of other dilemmas. One complication was that because the label fell short

of war, the ATO was led by the SBU, not the military. So, even if the Ukrainian military may have found traditional interstate war more familiar, it was left outside its comfort zone and confused as it faced a more ambiguous and uncomfortable situation in the spring of 2014. These conceptual contradictions and legal quandaries contributed to the ambiguity of the situation, already affected by the new rulers' limited capacity and contested political legitimacy. This context set parameters for strategy, or Ukraine's creation, control, and use of force, where ambiguity allowed – if not necessitated at the outset of the war in the spring of 2014 – the mobilization of volunteer battalions. In its initial stages the war was not interstate, or at least not waged between state armed forces, but between people. This in turn raised questions over whether the acts of force were indeed deliberate, controlled, and purposeful, let alone combined and harmonized to attain Ukrainian and Russian political objectives.

The way the volunteer battalions began to mobilize without state support and only later became truly integrated into the MoD and the MoIA speaks volumes about the prevailing ambiguities. The term “volunteer battalion” itself is steeped in ambiguity. On the one hand, “volunteer” suggests something that originates not from the state, but rather from society. Yet, on the other, a “battalion” is a relatively formidable conventional military unit, and military per definition is subordinate to a state. To complicate matters further, when waging war, these volunteers transgressed both internal policiary and external military roles. Ukraine simultaneously considered the threats to be of internal and external nature in a way difficult to mesh with traditional understandings of war.

To make sense of the conflict, the Ukrainian authorities and their Western backers soon dubbed it a new kind of “hybrid” war. The benefits of the label were mainly political: it allowed the new rulers in Kyiv to remove all opacity and blame everything on Russia in a way that allowed a “rally ’round the flag” effect. Hybrid war is almost always pejoratively used to describe activities conducted by others against us. While this one-sidedness questions the analytical neutrality of hybrid war, the term surprisingly found

supporters even among the Western military establishment. In Ukraine the term furthermore diminished the importance of domestic factors and political blunders. Faced with a revolution from without, these did not need to be confronted. Russia in turn claimed a revolution from within, implying the war was a civil war and an internal Ukrainian affair where Russia played no role, and where separatists should be taken as serious and legitimate political actors. This is reminiscent of Cold War practices, where Russia maintained its denials of intervention as facades, even when it was plain that the denials were false. In the case of Ukraine, there is general agreement about Russia's significant role in the war among researchers (Freedman 2019; Sakwa 2015; Wilson 2016), although the extent and timing of its role remain debated.

Freedman traces both hybrid warfare and asymmetric warfare to the same failures to practice "regular" war and warns that, once adopted, their definitions tend to broaden. He argues that hybrid war gives "coherence to what was often no more than a set of ad hoc and improvised arrangements" but "if pushed it could encompass almost everything" (Freedman 2017, 225). Somewhat paradoxically, hybrid war echoed what Jan Willem Honig (2017b) has argued concerning the so-called cyber war, where "the operative noun and the relegation of novelty to the adjective ... suggests that it is but a subform of a familiar phenomenon and so belongs within the professional remit of the armed forces."

Herein lies the problem. While the idea of hybrid war was politically useful, despite the novel adjective, the noun still pointed to a familiar phenomenon, one that gives primacy to military means. It is far from certain that this phenomenon that is often difficult to distinguish from more traditional statecraft can be countered using inherently military means. In the end, much of the "hybrid" prefix suggests the militarization of what could almost just as well be described as antagonistic statecraft under the threshold of war. Ultimately, the prefix "hybrid" risks blurring the boundary between peace and war in a manner that harks toward total war.

Despite the political benefits of the "hybrid" prefix and designation of enemies as "terrorists," the label brought little clarity to

the situation in Ukraine. As the Polish journalist Paweł Pieniążek (2017, 80) well summarized regarding the beginning of the ATO, “one of the strangest of military operations had officially begun.” Ukraine struggled to solve the problems of integration of different means as a part of a well-thought-out strategy. In fact, the military had to be forced to take action with the declaration of a state of emergency. Even then it appeared that the military was only prepared to fight the war on its own terms – something the opponents understandably did not go along with. The armed forces’ passivity especially prodded the volunteer battalions to mobilize. The state failed in its task to protect its sovereignty. Now society had to step up.

The failure to clarify the situation posed immediate and, for many, personal problems in Ukraine. When the lived realities of soldiers and volunteer combatants failed to correspond with expectations of war, the result was experienced as a *Sitzkrieg* – a phony war. After all, a *real* war would have witnessed the severing of diplomatic relations with Russia, and the sealing of the front line with an “iron curtain” so that trade, traffic, and supplies of electricity, gas, and water between the separatist-held areas and the rest of Ukraine would cease (Chernyshev 2015). Little of this happened. As Sergey scornfully asked when passing a Russian-owned bank in central Kyiv in 2018, would German banks have been allowed to operate in Moscow during the Second World War? As most of Ukraine appeared to continue life as usual, those like Sergey involved in this “phony war” increasingly felt that they existed in a “parallel reality.”

Between and between categories, the hybridity in hybrid war reflected ambiguity about what war and warfare amount to. The situation in Ukraine was neither war nor peace, nor could it be reduced to violence applied by state militaries against each other for political ends legitimized by this very purpose. In other words, the war in Ukraine defied existing notions of what war was. The resulting confusion that only ended with the Russian invasion in February 2022 came with real consequences.

The War That Never Was

The war in Donbas offers a contemporary example of the limitations of our existing understandings of war. If anything, the war in Ukraine has been understood to constitute “an uncomfortable,” limited war (Freedman 2019; Honig 2017a) to the extent that it was never officially declared. Despite some volunteers’ attempts to escalate the war by rallying the whole Ukrainian population against Russia, the official framing of the war never led to national-level mobilization to defend Ukraine from Russia. Despite the way the prefix “hybrid” risks widening conflict toward total war, the war in Donbas was always fought by limited means for limited ends.

In Ukraine the intrusion of politics into what was narrowly portrayed to constitute a traditional interstate war led to confusion. In this situation, the traditional narrow category of interstate war largely based on law could no longer contain the phenomenon. This war expanded beyond an armed struggle between similarly organized military bureaucracies, waged according to mutually recognized laws for political ends. The war in Donbas was undeclared, led by the security services, and waged between Ukrainians who had predominantly mobilized voluntarily in ways that were just as often policiary – enforcing political order – as military. The stakes ultimately involved not only the survival of Ukrainian territorial sovereignty, but even the future trajectory of Ukraine and its people. The conflict thus encompassed organized violence as only one of the necessary means in a broader struggle. Because of these factors, the war did not fit old classifications. Clinging to notions that could not explain the phenomenon only made it appear more ambiguous for those involved.

Considering the centrality of law in understanding war, this ambiguity can be illustrated by viewing the war from a legal perspective. The way the ATO fell well short of a declaration of war came with legal consequences, which in turn immediately influenced how force could and should be used. Central in war are the rights and obligations this construct entails: to make war possible, impersonal killing has not only to be differentiated from murder,

but made honorable (Clark 2015, 1; Gray 1998, 131–32). For war to exist and in order to distinguish an army from a mob, it is necessary that participants “are given to understand just whom they are and are not allowed to kill, for what ends, under what circumstances, and by what means” (Van Creveld 1991, 90). In Ukraine, these questions were not provided clear answers. Emphasis on law became a hindrance. While it is tempting to use legal considerations in a politically ambiguous situation to explain why Ukrainian armed forces hesitated at a critical time, it is important to recognize that the volunteers too faced a comparable dilemma. While law itself bestows legitimacy, war “serves as a residual, if largely concealed, normative source in its own right” (Clark 2015, 16; see also Barkawi and Brighton, 2011). As soon as the rising separatism was recognized as war, organized violence became a possible, if not the only plausible, course of action even in the absence of a formal declaration of war from above.

For many, the situation crystallized into a dilemma between law and morality. As summarized by Danylo, a member of Right Sector, law and morality were like the two edges of a knife, narrowly separated by a sharp blade. Faced with an unprecedented situation, it was necessary to prioritize morality over obsolete law – which in any case the Yanukovich government had only weeks earlier undermined by using it to frame the Maidan protestors as terrorists. According to Danylo, those who argued for the need to respect law depended on other people’s morality to protect it, through force if necessary. As Burzhua – a Dnipro-1 Battalion volunteer – explained, soldiers required orders before opening fire on separatists. Embedded in an official structure, the orders distinguished soldiers from mere criminals. According to him, the volunteers did not care much about this distinction. The end result, as the Aidar Battalion veteran Kazhan cleverly articulated, was that volunteer battalions were “illegally fighting for law.” In other words, in the absence of law (or its application), morality not only helped in the volunteers’ self-mobilization but also kept them from turning into the mob feared by the likes of Clausewitz and van Creveld. This conflict between war and morality and the

volunteers’ status as neither soldiers nor civilians nevertheless left them in an ungrounded and unstable position. Because without a declaration of war, the volunteers used violence against their fellow citizens without any legal authority to do so. A moral crisis ensued: would they be considered heroes or murderers once the dust settled?

The situation became psychologically vexing when those waging the war expected tighter categories defining rights and obligations, as well as guidance for waging war. Moreover, participants and observers alike experienced the war differently than they had anticipated. According to Sergey, this “war is not a traditional war. It is mixed war with mixed method, means.” Some of these means concerned even the volunteer battalion he belonged to. Incorporated as a special police battalion under the MoIA, his unit possessed the right to detain those suspected of separatism (these “police operations” are discussed further in [Chapter 6](#)). Armed with assault rifles and military gear, such units could operate in a high-risk environment; no ordinary police had such an extensive right to use force, while soldiers in the armed forces could not legally make arrests. While well equipped with small arms, these units lacked police training, and typically possessed no more than basic military training.

It would be easy to interpret the situation as a recipe for anarchy. In fact, this was how Clausewitz described people’s war. According to him, it was “a state of anarchy declared lawful, which is as dangerous as a foreign enemy to social order at home” (Clausewitz 2004, 517). In this regard van Creveld wavered and offered contradictory views. On the one hand, he claimed war is impossible without an understanding of its underpinnings. These ideas about war reflect their surrounding societies and have inherent limitations, which ultimately replace past models when they become obsolete (Van Creveld 1991, 204–5). On the other, van Creveld predicted a coming anarchy on a global scale, where war played an important role. Contradicting his own argument concerning the limitations of war, van Creveld maintained that war differed from other social activities as “it offers complete freedom” (Van Crev-

eld 1991, 218). While some of his contemporaries interpreted the waning of major war as something to celebrate (Mueller 1989), van Creveld (1991) portended the transformation of war to doom modern states. Unable to deal with non-state armed groups, they would lose legitimacy and wither away. With the benefit of hindsight, no such withering of states has yet taken place. In fact, the way states and non-state forces have coexisted and cooperated suggests that van Creveld may have exaggerated.

The view of the state represents the main difference between early 1990s debates about the transformation of war and the experience of the actual war in Ukraine. In 2014 only Russia spoke of state failure and in its propaganda sought to portray post-revolutionary Ukraine as a failed state. As proclaimed by the Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov at a session of the United Nations Human Rights Council on March 1, 2014, the Russian Federal Assembly approved the use of Russian armed forces in Ukraine “until the normalization of the socio-political situation in that country” was achieved (United Nations 2014). Others deemed that only Ukraine’s territorial sovereignty, not the existence of Ukraine itself, was threatened. And while several volunteers who mobilized for war in the spring of 2014 used the word “anarchy” when they described their experiences, this too requires qualification. Early in the war, volunteer battalions faced few limitations and even less control over the use of force. Yet if the initial stages of the war were indeed characterized by anarchy, it was anarchy within a very specific normative framework, which limited the conduct of war.

Bringing this all together, the existing notions of war and warfare constrained action in Ukraine, even with war undeclared. Virtually all Ukrainian volunteers interviewed perceived warfare to be within the purview of the state. Preventing the breakdown of Ukraine – a “Somalia scenario” of state failure – was one of the goals of the volunteer battalions. Without suspending criticism of the state that peaked at the Maidan, the volunteers acted on behalf of Ukraine when they felt the state was unable to do so. The insignia worn by the early volunteer battalions alone imply they

sought to essentially replace the functions of the state military and acted accordingly. Many Donbas Battalion fighters, for instance, wore “armed forces” and Ukraine badges well before they were legalized and incorporated by the state. It is not a coincidence that once the volunteers began to organize themselves, their formations resembled conventional military units. Even irregulars thus followed many “regular” conventions of war that circumscribed warfare. The variation of understanding of these norms also explains variation of theater-level escalation: some volunteer battalions were quicker to perceive the situation as war, and to start applying violence accordingly. Once the military and other state security forces became more active in the conflict, the volunteer battalions cooperated with them against the separatists. Ideas of what war was, and what one should and should not do in it, existed independent of the state. Neither did volunteers’ criticism of the state undermine it, nor lead to anarchy.

While ideas of the state are further discussed in [Chapter 4](#), here the focus shifts to nationalism, first in the context of the revolution and later the war. Violence at the Maidan and later in Crimea and eastern Ukraine had immediate sociological consequences. The sacrifices of the revolution not only demanded action to defend gains but also resulted in what many interviewees described as a strong feeling of civic momentum. Nationalism, in this sense, involved responsibility toward what was understood as the Ukrainian nation rather than the state. Even after the revolution, revolutionaries continued to perceive state institutions – not least the security services whom they perceived had first acted against Ukrainians at the Maidan and failed to defend Ukraine in its aftermath – with suspicion. Yet even as Ukrainians who initially opposed the revolution volunteered for the front lines, the war also became an important societal force in what can be called the Spirit of 2014.

The Spirit of 2014

For many Ukrainians, the Maidan became a watershed moment that forced them to pick a side. Violence and the dictatorship laws contributed to polarization, resulting in a strong feeling of civic momentum and patriotism. The war further accelerated the formation of group solidarity. Both Clausewitz and classic sociologists alike discussed how war shaped communities, in part because their struggle involved sacrifice, violence, and death. This threat of violence made war a unique form of collective action (Howard 2002; Weber 1946, 334–36). However, this solidarity is based on polarization that both includes and excludes. In that respect, the construction of “us” demanded differentiation from “them” (Centeno and Enriquez 2016, 125; Hutchinson 2017).

In Ukraine, the aftermath of the violence resulted in two opposite moods, which soon resulted in equally opposing movements: the pro-Maidan Spirit of 2014, and the anti-Maidan Russian spring prodded by the idea that Russia might come to the aid of revolutionary anti-Maidan forces in Ukraine. The Spirit of 2014 especially was comparable to the so-called Spirit of 1914, which followed the outbreak of the First World War. Many classic sociologists found the First World War to be an exemplary case of studying the sociology of war. Eric Leed (1979, 48) compares it to a revolution: “Like a revolution war was an event that projected participants outside of chronologically structured time.” The revolutionary potential to reconstruct society in new ways was also identified by a contemporary observer, the German sociologist Emil Lederer. Not unlike what would happen at the Maidan a century later, war changed the appearance of the cold and distant *Gesellschaft* (society) into that of a warm and personal *Gemeinschaft* (community). The shared danger was a force that made the mobilization of the whole of society to defend itself appear to be an uncoerced destiny; the danger prompted a newfound sense of unity which suspended previous social ties and raised an emotional susceptibility to supra-individual purpose inherent in nationalism. The homogenizing effect of war also raised hopes

that existing social stratification could be overcome in society at large (Lederer 2006).

The outbreak of the wars in 1914 and 2014 resulted in the emergence of comparable sociological processes: contemporaries experienced both as historical moments that aroused feelings of national community which broke down previous social barriers. These mass phenomena led to the emergence of significant volunteer movements – the famous Spirit of 1914, and the analogous Spirit of 2014. All revolutions constitute a fracture between old and new structures, rules and norms. The Spirit of 1914 and that of 2014 were based on the belief that societies could be remade and reformed. In both cases, war magnified the sense of danger to “us” caused by “them.” Burzhua captured the feeling of many volunteers: “It was better to fight them closer to the border than in [a Kyiv suburb].” As suggested by news of separatist tank gun barrels labeled “to Kyiv,” if left unchecked, separatism was expected to spread. Yet as Burzhua’s mention of the border indicates, the war was about defense – but defense against a Russian threat that had already manifested itself in Crimea. From this perspective the war was about survival and patriotism; imminent danger required rapid action.

Despite these similarities and the allure of a catchy historical analogue, it is necessary to remember the criticism aimed at the idea of Spirit of 1914. Not unlike many other nationalist myths, the popular enthusiasm and mobilization of 1914 have been exaggerated (Ringmar 2018; Verhey 2003). Memories of a united nation may have political appeal, but they are not altogether based on reality. While not a native concept, the Spirit of 2014 was undoubtedly closely connected with the revolution that preceded the war. However, while the revolution inspired deep feelings of unity, the war that followed proved these feelings were polarizing and concerned only a part of Ukrainian society. Unlike in the historiography of 1914 and official rhetoric in 2014, the polarization that contributed to the formation of a community predominantly targeted other Ukrainians within the same territorial borders.

If the volunteer battalions are considered as “a nation-in-the-making, in arms” (Käihkö 2018a), then it is necessary to recognize that this nation was one of many in Ukraine. The war in Donbas did not match Lederer’s description of the First World War as a war of people (*Volkskrieg*), where states succeeded in full mobilization, and when they successfully claimed to do so in defense of society. Full mobilization of people into the army in turn caused the opposition between state and society to disappear. For Lederer, war forced everything into a military form, where “nothing exists beyond the state, and nothing exists outside of the condition of war” (Lederer 2006, 254). Because the war in Donbas was always a limited affair, even its sociological consequences remained more modest.

The volunteer battalions rose from society and were hence close to the people – simultaneously armed, but not of the state. The volunteers’ criticism of the state alone suggests that the war in Donbas did not witness the kind of merging of state and society recorded by Lederer. While some worried about the militarization of and anti-democratic tendencies in Ukraine (Ishchenko 2020), nationalists welcomed the war as a unifying force that would remove negative Soviet and Russian influence from Ukrainian society and mend cleavages within it (Karagiannis 2016, 144–46). Several first-generation Ukrainians who fought in the war explained how they only now felt the weight of their national identity (Mitchnik 2019). Some women and members of sexual minorities felt that their participation in the war could change their societal status. Even liberals argued that the war helped form a stronger idea of Ukrainians, whose community inhabits the territory of Ukraine, controlled by the Ukrainian state. As noted, the state authorities framed the war as one between the Ukrainian people and Russia.

Full mobilization on either side nevertheless proved impossible. Internal divisions within Ukraine could not be explained or externalized by “Russian propaganda” or “information campaigns.” While existing cleavages were exploited, it was more difficult to create new ones. These divisions remained apparent in the way many Ukrainians continued to perceive the war as one of

choice, not of necessity. The war did not appear to concern everyone; and it was not universally accepted that, while individuals might not be interested in the war, the war might be interested in them. Despite nationalist rhetoric and efforts to make it appear so, the war was not understood as the struggle of a unitary and united society – the Ukrainian nation – against another.

This led to three problems. First, the Spirit of 2014 thus only concerned parts of Ukrainian society, some of whom volunteered to fight. This phenomenon remains important for understanding not only the war in Donbas but also the resulting sociological effects – which in 2022 seemed to surprise Russian and Western decision-makers alike. This spirit was arguably a wild one and not altogether coherent from 2014 onward. While inherently political and hence connected to collective interests, volunteer participation was more often based on individual reasons than on the more abstract goals of the Ukrainian state and its new rulers. While the reasons for mobilization were largely about the protection of Ukrainian sovereignty, it would be a mistake to equate this with the protection of the Ukrainian state and the political elites. Considering many of the volunteers were revolutionaries who wanted to reform and reconstitute power relations, the new political and military elites understandably perceived the volunteers with suspicion. And while the volunteers came together to oppose a common enemy, their diverse backgrounds and political views made cohesion impossible on the home front.

The second problem relates to the understanding of war that arose among the volunteers. Their inherently political nature meant they did not fit the common definition of a professional military – apolitical functionaries serving the higher interests of a depersonalized state – most commonly associated with Samuel Huntington (1957). This was not lost on the separatists, Russian propagandists, or some of the people living in Donbas. It became common to differentiate between volunteer battalions – especially Right Sector – and Ukrainian soldiers. Whereas soldiers were typically perceived as functionaries, the volunteers were not infrequently framed as neo-Nazi proponents of NATO keen on ban-

ning and tormenting anyone who spoke Russian. These notions about the volunteers further polarized the political situation (and were employed in Russian propaganda in 2022, then especially against Azov, now upgraded from battalion to regiment). This political polarization was not helped with the way the volunteers' views of the war clashed with government policy. With the government de-escalating the war that soon turned from maneuver to trench warfare, the volunteers were increasingly unable to follow their ideals of soldierliness, largely based on aggressiveness and offensiveness. Again, as in the First World War, this led to estrangement from both military values and societal expectations (Ashworth 1968, 418).

The third problem concerns societal expectations. As with the Spirit of 1914, the emotions of the Spirit of 2014 proved transitory. Like every so often with strong emotions, with time, even those raised by this spirit waned. While volunteers initially mobilized not only for the front lines but also to equip, feed, and otherwise support those who fought, fewer and fewer people had time for the war as it endured over years. Increasingly, civilians beyond the immediate front lines lived outside the war, paying little if any attention to it, and showing little or no interest in those who fought it. This led to notions of a "parallel reality," with those who endured discomfort and danger increasingly showing disdain for the lack of understanding and appreciation by most of society, as well as the state. Some felt betrayed for risking their lives for causes that may not have been experienced as being worthwhile in the first place. Simultaneously, several civilians felt ashamed for getting used to the war, growing numb to the constant litany of casualties. All this risked what some described as misgivings regarding the moral failure of the people when faced with defeat. Linking success in war with the vitality of a nation has historically contributed to political instability (Howard 2002, 18–19; Hutchinson 2017).

The Spirit of 2014 thus had a limited, albeit profound, influence on sociological developments in Ukraine. It led to the unification of one part of society, at the cost of polarization that deepened

riffs with the other. Like many wars before it, the war in Donbas became an enormous force of social and societal change (Hutchinson 2017). For example, from the start, the volunteers were often described as “patriots.” Many continue to identify as such.

Hinting at a complicated relationship between the volunteers and the state, the term patriot – and, by corollary, patriotism – does not have universally positive connotations in Ukraine because it is often linked with the far right. Subsequent Ukrainian governments and political movements have nevertheless continued to draw legitimacy from the Maidan Revolution and the war that followed. Both remained inescapable features in everyday life before the overt Russian invasion in February 2022 – when the volunteers once again played an important role as both role models and defenders of Ukraine as they hurried to offer resistance.

It is impossible to understand the volunteer battalions or the war they fought in without understanding the underlying political and sociological context. Because of the Spirit of 2014, thousands of Ukrainians mobilized to war, hence the creation of force. This is the topic of the next chapter. After that the focus continues to the consequences of the creation of force for its control and use.

CHAPTER 4

Creation of Force

From the Maidan to the Front

The inherently political nature of the Ukrainian volunteer battalions meant that creation of force came with important political and strategic consequences. It is not possible to understand this war without understanding who fought it. Early in the war its main combatants on the government side were volunteer battalions.

This chapter focuses on the creation of the volunteer battalions and contains three sections. The first section begins by theorizing the importance of creation of force for the study of strategy. Strategy is often thought to equal mere use of force in a way that neglects the importance of creation and control of force. The discussion here departs from strategic theory by analyzing the importance of the creation of force through a discussion of especially non-state actors in general, and in Ukraine in particular. In the case of Ukraine, it was the urgency of responding to the threat of separatism that prompted creation of force.

The second, and the chapter's longest section focuses on how this force – the Ukrainian volunteer battalions – was organized. The main feature of a force is its capacity to inflict and sustain violence. This requires cohesion and ideology that not only justifies the use of force but also motivates the group to expose themselves to others' use of force. Use of force is greatly helped by equipment, and maintaining a force takes supplies. Training helps with both cohesion and use of equipment, but also with control of force,

itself crucial for achieving the desired political ends. Cohesion, equipment, and training receive a subsection each.

The concluding third section offers an assessment of the volunteer battalions. While the volunteer battalions became a crucial stopgap measure against separatism in 2014, their organization was based on a rather conventional understanding of war. Even further, the volunteers' defeat against Russian regulars suggests that the volunteer battalions' military capabilities should not be overexaggerated. That said, aside from their military importance, the volunteers were first and foremost a political force. Their revolutionary Spirit of 2014 served as a political and psychological source of inspiration for those in support of the Maidan Revolution. Their zeal nevertheless far surpassed that of the political and military elites in Kyiv in a manner prone to make them suspicious.

Strategy and the Politics of Creation of Force

While Freedman's (2013) definition of strategy as "the art of creating power" suggests otherwise, in much strategic thinking the creation of force is taken for granted. As Clausewitz (2004, 86) noted, strategy "takes things as it finds them." Accepting this view, however, considerably reduces the scope of strategy: for Clausewitz, strategy focused on combat, not long-term defense planning, confrontations, or alliances. Unsurprisingly, Clausewitz's military view of strategy is not the same as that of modern thinkers, who tend to be civilians. In fact, much of what Clausewitz saw as strategy would today be more narrowly viewed as belonging to the operational level of war (Howard 2002, 2–4; Strachan 2013, 14–15, 57–58).

This disaggregation of the process of the creation of force from strategic thinking stems initially from assumptions advocated by Clausewitz. His assumptions continue form the core of the Western military profession: war is a violent confrontation of wills, best fought by state-owned military establishments who according to prevailing understanding of civil–military relations keep politics and politicians at arms' length. However, it is uncertain

whether these assumptions ever held in the West, and they have certainly not done so elsewhere. Much of the social sciences suffer from Eurocentric domination of the concept of the nation-state. As Tarak Barkawi (2017, 61) has argued, the nation-state is central to conceptualizations of political modernity where state, army, and society are presented in “an isomorphic, sovereign territorial package.” Analysis of the creation of force reveals rich social processes which enable some social and political alternatives, while denying others (Barkawi 2017, 72). Even Clausewitz’s (2004, 19) “wonderful trinity” – the people, the general and his army, and government – can be interpreted to have represented these three, where the specific circumstances make each war unique.

Nevertheless, the social and political dimensions of not only use but also creation and control of force have often been obscured by understanding these processes as instrumental, and even technical matters. This has contributed to a neglect of the political and sociological dimensions necessary to understand war and its dynamics.

The war in Donbas offers a contemporary case in the near abroad which questions such a narrow view of strategy. War cannot be limited to violence between similarly constructed armed groups that serve cohesive nation-states. Neither can waging war be understood as an apolitical activity. While the conventionalization of armed forces might imply otherwise, even the process of creation of force is inherently political. Decisions regarding the creation of force have consequences not only for its subsequent control and use but also for politics, society, and – not least – the individuals involved. This is evident, for instance, with comparative militias – such as the interwar German Freikorps and Finnish civil guards (Ahlbäck 2014; Gerwarth 2012; Haapala and Tikka 2012; Waite 1969) – that resemble the Ukrainian volunteer battalions.

The decline of interstate war has been met by the recognition of the importance of non-state actors. While insurgents as revisionist if not revolutionary actors have received the bulk of the attention, investigations of militia forces have lagged behind. Even

finding a definition for militias has proven difficult. Etymologically, militia derives from the Latin *miles*, or soldier, and originally simply denoted military service. In 10th-century post-classical Latin, "militia" also began to be used for a feudally levied army, thus connecting the word to a nonprofessional force. The English word "militia" first appeared in the late 16th century, when it simply meant an army that served a sovereign. From the mid-17th century onward and as codified in the constitution of the United States in 1787, "militia" began to be used to denote locally mobilized people in arms who held another trade, and were thus distinct from professional soldiers and mercenaries. From this perspective, bands of conscripted reservists can still be considered militias.

Another way to understand militias was presented with the rise of nationalism and especially with fascism and communism, as militias began to be associated with ideological paramilitary forces. This is how militias continue to be understood in academic circles as armed groups outside state purview. In the former Soviet Union, including Ukraine, militia simply refers to uniformed police (Oxford English Dictionary 2002b). Militias also played important roles in the region during the Second World War. Four million militia fighters were quickly mobilized, half of which were later integrated into the Red Army (Bellamy 2008, 10). In military contexts "paramilitary" and "militia" are often used synonymously. Here the Greek prefix *para* implies that such forces are deficient and subordinate, yet also analogous and parallel. They thus exist within the same category as regular forces, but in an ancillary if not inferior position (Oxford English Dictionary 2005).

Non-state actors especially demonstrate the importance of the creation of force for strategy. Often starting as ad hoc formations, they need to dedicate significant resources, time, and effort to the creation and control of force before they can meaningfully use it. On the state side, the more established bureaucratic processes of force generation can make things appear a routine matter. Yet the assumption of military forces as apolitical is problematic: despite attempts to separate them from the societies they come from, sol-

diers are people too. While more visible with militias and paramilitary forces, even soldiers' loyalties are thus tied to broader political contexts (Moskos 1970). In Ukraine the volunteers were both a consequence and a manifestation of the Spirit of 2014 and a revolution that had left Ukraine politically divided and institutionally fragmented.

The volunteers' origins can be traced to the Maidan. Like much collective action, even the protests and hence the revolution depended on coordination and logistic efforts. The Maidan state was simultaneously a reminder and critique of the failings of the Ukrainian state, the functions of which it sought to perform better. These functions even included those associated with force. Facing the threat of infiltration by government-paid provocateurs that could justify violent crackdown, the protest needed to be controlled and defended against Berkut, the riot police. This security was provided by *самооборона* (self-defense) units, divided into *сотні* (lit. hundreds), a Cossack military term for "company" also used by the military arm of the Ukrainian nationalists during the Second World War. While continuing to build on the principles of self-discipline and self-organization, toward the end of the protests these *сотні* became increasingly structured, some even armed. Their numbers were significant and may eventually have reached 12,000 (Ishchenko 2016).

The immediate aftermath of the revolution and especially the start of the war tested the Maidan volunteers' capacity to organize and to create logistics networks. Whereas they had provided items like firewood and food to the Maidan, with the escalation of the conflict the civilian volunteers also began to supply combatants with body armor, uniforms, and QuikClot gauze pads. In order to bypass the perceived plague of top-down corruption within the state and the armed forces, much of this logistical support was crowdsourced and came directly from civil society.

After inheriting the world's fourth-largest military force at independence in 1991, Ukraine essentially failed at subsequent military reforms. Earlier in 2012, the government admitted that 90 percent of the weapons the armed forces possessed were obso-

lete and needed to be replaced. This upgrade was not forthcoming, as more than 83 percent of the defense budget – itself less than 1 percent of GDP – was spent on maintaining the force through meager salaries, rather than on developing it through new matériel or training (Sanders 2017, 34–35). Like elsewhere within the state, corruption was pervasive. When asked, virtually all Ukrainians – including officers – described the armed forces before 2014 as an organization with low reputation and appeal.

Much of this neglect can be explained by the way successive Ukrainian governments before 2014 had prioritized internal threats over external ones. As repeated several times during the meeting of the National Security and Defense Council in February 2014, there was no army the post-revolutionary government could rely on (Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council 2016). Neither had Ukrainian defense planning been updated from the Soviet era. Military threats were still expected to come from the west instead of the east. No military forces were based in Donbas when the conflict began to simmer (McDermott 2015, 7–8). On March 17, in the tumult that followed the revolution, Interim President Turchynov signed a decree on the mobilization of territorial defense battalions. By then volunteers and some volunteer battalions had already risen to defend Ukraine and its territorial sovereignty from a “Somalia scenario,” or breakdown of order that would furthermore threaten the gains of the revolution.

Volunteers are known in Ukrainian as волонтери (*volontery*) – civilians who, for instance, organize donations and buy things for those fighting. Military volunteers are in turn known as добровольці (*dobrovol'tsi*), a compound word that combines добро (*dobro*, good) and воля (*volya*, will). Literally translated, the volunteers were thus “those with good will,” or those “who, from their own goodwill, performed a certain duty.” In the context of post-Maidan Ukraine, *dobrovol'tsi* first and foremost refers to the people who volunteered for war.

The emphasis on goodwill is not mere semantics. Rising in a context where the state was widely perceived to be both corrupt and debilitated, the volunteer battalions presented themselves as

a more pure and moral force. For some they were the “first on the front lines” (Bulakh, Senkiv, and Teperik 2017), and in so being, “saved the country” (Hladka et al. 2017; see also Fedorenko and Umland 2022; Klymenko 2018, 167). The short-lived Ukrainian armed volunteer movement and its interaction with electoral politics, in some regards did, and in other regards did not, fit patterns observed in research into irregular armed groups (IAGs). As Oleksii Honcharenko, a member of the Ukrainian parliament and the head of Odesa regional state administration in 2014, explained (quoted in Hladka et al. 2017, 80):

Did we need volunteer battalions back then? There was no alternative whatsoever. It was absolutely necessary, as well as the volunteers who saved the Ukrainian army with their aid, and their supplies. The volunteer battalions, they all saved our country in the worst and most dangerous moments ... back then, it was a real salvation.

The volunteer creed is well summarized by Isaiah 6:8, which one volunteer battalion fighter had tattooed on his body: “And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ Then I said, ‘Here am I! Send me.’” It was the threat to Ukrainian territorial sovereignty that simplified the choice and gave motivation to volunteers. If separatists were not stopped in the east, where would they stop? The initiative required was clear in the similar motto adopted by the Dnipro-1 Battalion: “If not us, then who?”

It deserves to be emphasized that the volunteer mobilization took place in the immediate aftermath of a revolution and a context characterized by ambiguity. As Burzhua explained, there was not only “an uncertainty of who we were when we went to war,” it was equally unclear “what we would become.” According to Sviatoslav, it only became evident in 2015–16 that the volunteers would be heroes, not villains – even if the 2019 presidential elections and especially the victory of Volodymyr Zelensky raised concerns among volunteer fighters about future legal consequences for participating in the war.

The volunteer ethos offers a significant explanation for the large number who, despite the uncertainties, mobilized to fight separatism. Yuri Stasyuk (2018, 133) estimates their total number as 29,333. While difficult to verify, the figure amounts to about six times the number of military personnel available at the time of the invasion of Crimea. These volunteers were in time organized into 4 National Guard battalions and 38 special patrol police units under the MoIA, 32 territorial defense battalions under the MoD, as well as 9 formations which remained outside state structures (Stasyuk 2018, 246–55). The number of volunteer-staffed special police units offers a stark reminder of the weakness of the Ukrainian state even when it came to law enforcement. Chronically understaffed during the war, the state had little alternative but to rely on available volunteer forces for both enforcing internal order and staving off external threats.

Even with considerable assistance from civil society, volunteer battalion fighters explained how they were often expected to pay for much of their equipment out of their own pockets. This alone suggests that the majority were motivated more by ideals than material interests. They appeared willing not only to spend money but equally to sacrifice their lives for a greater cause (Karagiannis 2016). This philosophy marked how they were perceived to herald a political and social – and ultimately societal – transformation inherent in the Spirit of 2014 (Puglisi 2015b). This reformatory potential gave them wider appeal, and made even the new government perceive them as a source of legitimacy.

At the same time, the volunteer battalions retained the revolutionary potential of the Spirit of 2014. State weakness underlines the threat the volunteers posed to those in power. Some of the volunteers saw the war as the external and more urgent dimension of the coming internal political struggle. As Semen Semenchenko, founder of the Donbas Battalion, stated in May 2014 (quoted in Ukrainian Volunteer Defense Force “Donbas” 2014), “if Ukraine survives, it won’t ever be the same, we won’t let it happen. Once this phase of extreme standoff is over in our region, we will focus our efforts on what’s happening in Kiev.” Other volunteer battal-

ion fighters described a similar plan: “First we defeat the external enemy, then return to Kyiv and restore order” (Furmanyuk 2015).

The military elites were especially unhappy to find their professional autonomy eroded by what they considered uncontrollable and untrained militias. It is possible that the absence of alternative forces contributed to the military view that there was no war, nor would there be one. Yet as long as this view was accepted, there was no need to deal with the volunteer forces; even after the political elites had begun to think otherwise, the military opposed cooperation with the volunteer battalions (Bukkvoll 2019). Both the new political and the old military guard nevertheless faced the need to control the volunteer battalions.

The volunteers bought time for the army to prepare for war. Yet as the case of the volunteer battalions demonstrates, just like the rest of strategy, even construction of force is an inherently political process. The volunteers were political actors in their own right in a war characterized by ambiguity. Both politics and ambiguity permeated the volunteer battalions, who were close to society, yet simultaneously armed but not of the state military. The political nature of the battalions also further widened existing cleavages in Ukraine, and hence influenced the political dynamics of the conflict. Considering that violence alone polarizes, this may have been inevitable. Even in Kyiv, the government had to consider the revolutionary politics of the now-armed volunteers when it designed its strategy, and the available ends it could ultimately attain. In fact, for at least some volunteer battalions the polarization was intentional, as they sought to drag the state into the conflict whether its representatives wanted it or not.

While the volunteer battalions were crucial in the early days of the war, they were essentially poorly trained and modestly armed light infantry. Due to difficulties of coordination alone, the volunteers’ performance was on the whole less than the sum of its parts. However, this should be put in context as some of the volunteers did have extensive combat and military service experience, which far surpassed the poor training undertaken by the majority in the armed forces. Aside from heavy matériel, thanks to civil society

assistance the volunteers were soon better equipped than their peers in the armed forces. Ultimately, the volunteers' willingness to wage war raises the question of which group was more professional. If professionalization is measured by an apolitical nature, then the military prevailed. Yet faced with uncertainty in the atmosphere following the Maidan Revolution, this professional behavior risked lapsing into passivity. In Ukraine the military chain of command became paralyzed as no one appeared to be prepared to take responsibility. As the volunteers took up the fight with separatists, it could be argued that, in a way, they acted more professionally. When facing similarly ad hoc separatists, the volunteers prevailed. It took the arrival of mechanized Russian regulars who outgunned and outperformed even the Ukrainian armed forces to turn the tide.

Although the state struggled to keep up with society in the war, with time the ambiguity of the situation decreased. This was especially the case after the army joined the war in earnest, further conventionalizing it. In the early days of the conflict, the state was the passenger while the volunteers drove.

Organizing Force

The main characteristic of a force is its capacity for violence, or use of force. While people and the cohesion that binds them together still constitute the core of any force, use of lethal violence against armed opponents requires arms and ammunition. A force requires maintenance in the form of food, water, and medicine so that it can concentrate on fighting. Equipment also increases effectiveness. Vehicles allow better mobility, while personal armor and proper clothing improve protection. Uniforms reduce friendly fire, but also help in differentiating between combatants and noncombatants. Militarily, uniforms also assist in controlling and coordinating force in close quarters. Radios and other means of communication do the same at longer distances. Finally, training not only distinguishes a force from a mob but also acts as a force multiplier. Training is also necessary for effective use of

some of the more advanced arms and equipment, and overall adds to performance.

Stemming from society and not from the state, the volunteer battalions initially enjoyed more widespread support than state institutions, including the military. One poll published in December 2014 put them after civil society organizations when it came to public trust, but ahead of both the Ukrainian army and the church (Puglisi 2015b, 13). While one has to be careful with polls conducted in politicized environments, especially when their methodology is not transparent, the low trust toward state institutions appears undeniable. Another survey noted that 61 percent (completely or somewhat) trusted civilian volunteers, compared with 54 percent in May–June 2016. Volunteer battalions remained the second-most trusted actors, with 49 percent support in 2015 and 50 percent in 2016, with the army trailing close behind with 45 percent and 47 percent, respectively. Other state actors received much lower support, led by exceptional trust in the local self-government authorities at rather modest 20 percent and 24 percent, respectively (USAID FAIR Justice Project 2016, 64).

This lack of trust in state institutions stands in direct contrast to previous theories that explain citizens' consent to conscription by perceived government fairness and trustworthiness (Levi 1997), yet helps to explain the rise of volunteer battalions. The most comprehensive survey of volunteer battalion members to date showed that 60 percent of volunteers decided to join a specific volunteer unit because they did not trust the armed forces (Bulakh, Senkiv, and Teperik 2017, 16). Corruption and Soviet-era military bureaucracy contributed to this lack of trust, as did the state's perception of the situation. Even after the Russian annexation of Crimea, not everyone understood the threat of separatism in eastern Ukraine to constitute an acute problem. As a result, many volunteers were simply unable to mobilize against separatism through the existing state institutions.

As the protestors appeared to prevail against Yanukovych in early 2014, some perceived the hand of Russia behind him and anticipated Russian interference. Following the example set by

some right-wing sympathizers years earlier, people like Kazhan and Sviatoslav sought trainers with previous military experience and began to prepare for war. In February–March 2014, witnessing the Russian invasion of Crimea, thousands of Ukrainians did not wait for mobilization orders, but instead lined up in front of military commissariats tasked with recruitment. Bribing doctors had been common in the past in order to escape conscription before Yanukovich scrapped the mandatory military service in late 2013. Some now sought out doctors to reverse previous diagnoses and to confirm that they were fit and able for military service. Sasha, a young professional, explained how he and several hundred others – young, old, civilians, and veterans of past wars – arrived at a commissariat to serve their country, only to be turned down by officers. “The situation is under control” and “you are not needed,” the officers said. It took over four months before Sasha received a mobilization letter by mail. By then the situation was much worse due to the escalation of the war, which Sasha believes could have been averted by immediate action. This kind of criticism about government hesitation remains widespread (Bereza 2014; Furmanyuk 2015; Pieniążek 2017, 17).

Burzhua, a businessman, received similar treatment at a different military commissariat. Worried about a full-scale Russian invasion, he arranged a few business meetings in his home region. After his last meeting he entered the commissariat, still wearing a business suit. First greeted by guards who would not believe that he had come to enlist, Burzhua was ultimately turned down by the last of seven investigating doctors because of a minor health issue that would not have had any significant influence on his service. He tried to convince, threaten, and ultimately bribe the recruitment committee, to no avail. He was later told that the committee was afraid he had been sent by SBU to test adherence to the Soviet-era recruitment criteria. As a result, Burzhua was not allowed to defend his country as a part of the armed forces. People like Kazhan and Sviatoslav did not even try. Considering that one had to deal with a specific commissariat located in one’s home region, friends who came from different regions but who wanted

to enter the war together would inevitably be separated. Bureaucracy effectively killed any notions of “pals’ battalions” within the official structures.

As the example of Burzhua illustrates, recruitment criteria kept scores from enlisting, including everyone deemed too young or old, as well as those with criminal records. As Olexa described, volunteer battalions initially had no policy about criminal past. Another volunteer combatant believed that the reason volunteers “survived [was] because ... people [were] not always good.” It was only afterward that the authorities began to question the way convicted criminals had been incorporated into state service. This also applied to the law enforcement bodies (Shishkin 2014). In one extreme example, out of the 149 combatants of the Tornado company that served as a police unit under the MoIA, 38 had previous criminal records (Media Initiative Group for Human Rights 2017). Sergey too served as a de facto police officer together with someone who had served a prison sentence for bank robbery.

The case of Colonel Andriy Teteruk is illustrative of the overall recruitment difficulties. After being turned down by military commissariats as they did not know what to do with him, Teteruk became the commander of the Peacemaker volunteer battalion (Stasyuk 2018, 119). A former United Nations peacekeeper, Teteruk claims he was asked by the MoIA to form a unit from Ukrainian peacekeeping veterans (Fedorenko and Umland 2022, 251–52). Even non-commissioned officers who had served in the army for a decade could be deemed overqualified to serve in the ATO: one was offered a position as head of a canteen. He resigned from the military and joined the Azov Battalion as the fastest way to get to the fight. As with Sasha, even many of those who passed medical examinations were only called to service after the escalation of the situation.

The thousands of volunteers who took up arms initially did so not because of but rather *despite* the state. As Viktor Chalavan, adviser to the head of the National Police of Ukraine, testified:

the period of April–May 2014 is characterized by high level of disorganization in the entire state machinery of Ukraine, by lack of political will of the high ranking officials ... On the one hand, there were many people who were ready to defend Ukraine, and on the other hand, there was this traditional system ... incapable of accepting these people, giving them the official right to defend the country, and providing them with weapons ... people would come to the recruitment offices, but the recruitment offices weren't ready to mobilize those people to defend Ukraine. The Armed Forces didn't exist *de facto*. (Quoted in Hladka et al. 2017, 165)

Volunteer battalions became a way to channel popular enthusiasm and passion into force in order to defend the country when the state was unprepared – and, as these narratives imply, perceived unwilling – to do so. Yet many like Sasha saw serving with volunteer battalions as problematic due to their uncertain legal status. After all, any run-ins with the law could negatively future hopes, especially for a career in the public sector. Sasha was far from the only one who ultimately chose to wait and see how the situation developed. Socio-economic factors also played a role in decisions about mobilization. Absence of official combatant status was especially difficult for those with families. In case of injury or death, they could expect no support from the state. Yet, as proven by the sheer number of volunteers who mobilized, such considerations hindered, but did not stop, self-mobilization. In fact, many appear to have never applied for official combatant status.

To continue with Burzhua's narrative, in comparison to Sasha he was less concerned about legal consequences because he worked in the private sector. While Burzhua had never liked guns or the military, he felt it was his duty to defend his country. He too had sought private weapons training from veterans of one SBU special forces unit in case the situation escalated. Through his contacts established at the Maidan he was referred to the Dnipro-1 Battalion. By this time the MoIA had provided a way to legalize volunteers as National Guard and Special Tasks Patrol Police units. The

National Guard had been disbanded in 2000 in order to cut costs. On March 13, 2014, the Ukrainian parliament passed a law on the creation of a 60,000-strong National Guard under the MoIA, thus creating legal room for the volunteer battalions. A few days later the ministry was already training thousands of National Guard volunteers. Some of this training took place at the Maidan, as if to remind everyone that the revolutionary struggle was not over.

The minister of internal affairs Arsen Avakov later recounted how during the first days of April 2014 the only available forces belonged to the National Guard special forces. Even these

were not easy to command – we had to actually convince them and check the moral readiness of the soldiers to follow the orders, and to motivate them, and to check if they understood their orders correctly. The control issue was one of the main reasons for creating the National Guard – we had to reformat the existing special forces and engage motivated people who went through Maidan.

Clear in this narrative is the weakness of state institutions and especially available force that could be controlled. The solution was to create a new force using the politically reliable revolutionaries. These tasks were not easy. As Avakov (quoted in Butusov 2016) noted, “everything was created from scratch.”

By the time Burzhua came in contact with Dnipro-1, it had already formally joined the MoIA as a Special Tasks Patrol Police battalion. This necessitated a new medical examination. Worried about another rejection, Burzhua came to the appointment with a friend who was already in Dnipro-1. The friend vouched that Burzhua too was a member, and the medical check became a mere formality. Illustrating the differences between the practices of state structures and volunteer battalions even after their nominal incorporation into formal state structures, Burzhua soon left for war.

As discussed in [Chapter 5](#), control of force was a central political and practical consideration for the new government. The government had to make everything with its war effort appear organ-

ized and legal. But while volunteer battalions were successively incorporated into state structures through new laws, this did not guarantee that the state actually exerted control over them. How could it, considering that in the early phases of the war the state could not even give sufficient material and moral support to its armed forces, let alone volunteer battalions? Volunteers – but even soldiers in the Ukrainian armed forces – had to dig into their own pockets to ensure that they would remain warm, dry, and as safe as possible during their fight against separatism. The volunteers were largely expected to bring their own equipment, initially even weapons. Things were marginally better in the armed forces, as most of what they provided came from the Soviet era. According to Aleksandr, the material deficiencies had effectively caused the army to “rot away.” Showing photos on his mobile phone from the summer of 2014, Aleksandr joked that they were not fighting like the 21st century, but seemingly re-enacting battles of the Second World War. A casual observer would likely have believed him. In some of these photos Aleksandr’s squad was in full action, scraping rust from rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs). The launcher they used to shoot these grenades was older than anyone in the squad, dating back to 1971. The 7.62 × 39 mm rounds they were given had been produced in 1956 and 1962.

While material factors posed a challenge, any organized use of force furthermore requires ideological justification (Malešević 2010). Ideology is also central for understanding the cohesion of armed groups, or why their members stick together even when facing fire.

Cohesion

Cohesion refers to how forces keep performing even when faced with extreme stress, injury, and death. Cohesion is a prerequisite for organized force and winning war. It has been studied at the macro level of analysis (concerning concepts like the nation and the state), meso level (armed groups and military organizations), and micro level (the squad and similar small groups where face-

to-face interaction is possible). The better these three levels are harmonized, the stronger the cohesion (Käihkö 2018b; see also Käihkö and Haldén 2020).

The study of cohesion has historically followed the development of military tactics and broader societal trends. Typically, one level of analysis has been emphasized over the others. Until massive frontal assaults began to be questioned in the later stages of the First World War, ideology and nationalism were considered important macro-level factors. With mass armies breaking down into elite formations, even the study of cohesion began to stress micro-level small groups (Collins 2013; Shils and Janowitz 1948; Wessely 2006). This shift in focus also made sense from a Western liberal perspective, which sees individuals as private agents increasingly removed from their sociological environments (Haldén 2018). Yet the case of the Ukrainian volunteer battalions echoes the caution Edward Shils expressed about focusing on the micro level alone. Meso-level armed groups cannot be reduced to a mere collection of micro-level primary groups (Shils 1950), but need to be understood in a broader macro-level context (Shils 1982). Even further, cohesion has often been considered only at one stage. The focus of the study of cohesion has moved from why units continue to fight against all odds while suffering horrible attrition (Shils and Janowitz 1948) to surveying positive feelings between servicemen and servicewomen during more peaceful times (Siebold 2007). It is also important to consider the reasons for the initial mobilization alongside the stages of sustainment and combat (Berkovich 2017).

According to the largest survey of volunteer battalion fighters, the main reasons for joining up included lack of trust in the armed forces (59.8 percent of respondents), better service conditions (50.9 percent), stricter discipline (41 percent), historical glory of a specific unit (36.3 percent), chance (30.9 percent), following friends (20.3 percent), lack of choice (18.5 percent), patriotism (17.6 percent), better uniforms (14.9 percent), and better armaments (9.9 percent), with 11.6 percent not answering the question (Bulakh, Senkiv, and Teperik 2017, 17). It is, however,

unclear who exactly was surveyed. It would have been useful to break down the results according to when respondents mobilized, as one can expect the answers to change with the intensification of the conflict from the spring of 2014 to November 2016, when the study ended, and when the military situation had stabilized.

Kazhan for one possessed a straightforward idea about cohesion. He saw that in war “all ideology ends after a week. After that [you] don’t give a fuck. You have your guys; they have their guys.” Kazhan repeatedly emphasized that the main factor for fostering cohesion among the combined Ukrainian forces was war itself. When facing the same context and threat, war became a positive force that overcame problems and made strangers feel like brothers. The front line developed “common interests” as there were “death and life issues to discuss and worry about.” For Kazhan, these were a “very good glue.” Though most interaction among volunteers was within their up-to-platoon-size primary groups (Siebold 2007), narrowing the analysis to encompass only the micro level nevertheless risks missing the crucial macro-level ideological factors, and also the broader political context that created the community of “patriotic” volunteers and the horizontal loyalties among them in the first place. These macro-level factors led to the mobilization to meso-level battalions, which consisted of the micro-level groups. Kazhan admitted that ideology was crucial in this regard. Even if everyone had their individual reasons for mobilizing, ideology in the shape of a shared national framework united the volunteers. As a source of cohesion, for most volunteers the meso level remained the least important one. Combat activities made it difficult for organizations to dedicate resources to establish cohesion. For many volunteers the micro-level factors first became important when faced with enemies and danger.

As long as the war remained at low intensity, it was predominantly waged at the small-group level. Some friends like Kazhan and Sviatoslav mobilized together. More commonly, however, individuals joined units where they knew no one (Aaliyev 2021). The volunteer nature of the battalions meant that comradeship and personal motivation brought order. Volunteers referred to each

other in an informal manner, and leaders were elected through what Kazhan called “tribal democracy”: everyone had the right to command, but in his unit the person with most authority to do so was an ethnic Russian with extensive military experience. Discipline remained loose, and it was common for volunteers to decline to participate in missions. There was often little trust even among different groups within a single battalion, let alone upward toward military command or other battalions. Following the first firefights, members of the Aidar Battalion began to spread out, with different groups becoming separated from each other. While Kazhan and Sviatoslav spoke much about their group, their horizons did not extend to Aidar or higher levels of command. The same was true even for other volunteers, with the exception of a few Azov fighters who joined after 2015.

The volunteers interviewed chose their units for personal reasons rather than because of the specific ideological reputation of a particular battalion. Social media and YouTube made connecting with battalions easy, as several of their commanders maintained a visible online presence. This kind of public relations was not only used for recruitment but also for generating support, and even for political advocacy. While acknowledging the early importance of uniting around personalities like Semenchenko and the leader of Right Sector, Dmytro Yarosh, Burzhua noted that “it became blatantly obvious very soon that most of the leaders are assholes not worthy of being leaders.” Material benefits were never mentioned during interviews. Any ideological underpinnings of a battalion were at best an indirect reason for joining it, although the especially radical reputation of Right Sector made it suspect. Several volunteers interviewed doubted this battalion of multiple groups could be controlled, so they did not want to join it. According to Burzhua, many “freaks” flocked to Azov. Azov was especially favored by ultras (football hooligans), but it was possible to find neo-Nazis fighting alongside practicing Jews within its ranks. The battalion’s notorious neo-Nazi reputation became repeatedly apparent during fieldwork, as both Azovites and their acquaintances repeatedly greeted others with “Sieg Heil” or “Heil

Hitler.” After being told they were Nazis, some Azovites ironically adopted these greetings, while others just thought it fun to remind themselves of these perceptions – which were interpreted mainly as Russian propaganda. None of the Azov fighters interviewed showed any interest in the admittedly extreme right-wing elite-level political discourse within Azov, but neither did any of them remain a part of the Azov Regiment either.

In practice, many joined the battalion available to them with the least effort, finding a place where one could have friends and do most good, however defined. For instance, Kazhan and Sviatoslav initially planned to join the Golden Gate Battalion, but realized after two weeks that the unit would be subordinated to the MoIA. Faced with the prospect of staying in Kyiv to suppress the remaining Maidan protestors, they instead opted for the more military Aidar, which included many Afghanistan veterans. Another group of friends from Donetsk divided and joined the battalion of best fit given what they were able to and wanted to contribute just before the Battle of Ilovaisk in the late summer of 2014. A few saw Ilovaisk as a strategic railroad hub that Russia needed to control in order to transport heavy equipment such as tanks to Donbas. Based on this assessment, they sought a volunteer battalion based in Ilovaisk, and joined it as the most probable way to get to fight. For Western foreign fighters in particular, Azov and Right Sector emerged as the easiest ways to join the war. Three waves of volunteers can thus be distinguished: the first and the most ideological wave consisting of the ideological core that mobilized straight from Maidan; the second wave consisting of those in eastern Ukraine who mobilized after feeling threatened by the rising separatism; and the third and largest wave consisting of those who waited until the political situation had normalized somewhat and the battalions become legalized.

As noted, several commanders emerged as public figures, attracting followers who later joined their units. Groups rather than battalions feature in volunteer narratives, but some supplies – like arms, ammunition, food, and possibly salaries – nevertheless often came through the meso-level battalions. That said, many

of these popular commanders operated below the battalion level, and were supplied directly by civilian volunteers. When several important figures clashed within the same unit, the resulting fragmentation of a number of volunteer battalions should not have come as a surprise. Thus, cohesion on the meso level should not be exaggerated. Building institutions is challenging in any context, but especially difficult during war; the ad hoc nature of the volunteer battalions meant that they were anything but the kind of “total institutions” militaries have famously been described as (Goffman 1987). In comparison with the armed forces, most volunteer battalions struggled to establish structures that helped foster cohesion during the war.

Azov likely invested the most effort by establishing rituals such as funeral rites to unite its forces, but these were not possible during intensive fighting. According to Sergey, Azov culture mixed influences from football hooliganism, nationalism, and warrior cults (with some paganism on the side, as illustrated by the temples for Perun, the Slavic god of thunder, in Azov bases). For example, a commander could punch a subordinate and expect him to fight back, while several others carried a “cold weapon” like a cavalry saber or an axe. The oath of the Ukrainian patriot, which according to Sergey had been written with blood on the wall of a Polish prison cell by one of the leaders of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists during the interwar era, was ceremonially recited twice every day. In contrast, most battalions offered little more than unit badges, purpose, and some rudimentary identity in the form of membership of a particular battalion. While even this no doubt enhanced motivation and cohesion on lower levels, the notion that each unit was better than the rest helped little with coordination among them. Another problem was that the lack of communication, coordination, and ultimately control limited volunteers’ immediate horizons to their own semi-independent units within battalions.

As the volunteer survey results suggest, most who sought to mobilize to war and joined volunteer battalions did so because of the lack of better alternatives, or even any alternatives at all.

The narratives also imply that mobilization depended more on macro-level factors and meso-level material support than micro-level concerns: it was the ideology inherent in the Spirit of 2014 – or, perhaps more accurately, the perceived lack of ideology and action among the state security forces – that gave rise to the volunteer battalions in the first place. While separatists were clearly against the state, the state's security forces were mostly apathetic. Some like Berkut had already demonstrated their readiness to use force against segments of the population at the Maidan. Some Maidan activists too had resorted to force against the riot police. After the revolution the new government opened investigations against Berkut, who now had a reason to fear reprisals (these investigations would lead to few concrete results, and in December 2019 the Ukrainian government released five Berkut officers accused of Maidan shootings as a part of a prisoner exchange). At the outset of the conflict, those with strong sympathies for one side or the other left to join either the separatists or the volunteer battalions. The combination of state disarray and an increasingly polarized society elevated the political reliability of force to a core consideration. In this situation, the government turned to what appeared to be its only available politically reliable force: the people who had given rise to it in the first place, and especially the Maidan activists.

The war in Ukraine questions many deeply held ideas about the apolitical nature of force. Societal divisions raised questions about the political reliability of the existing forces. While the military as an institution remained neutral during the revolution, it demonstrated clear reservations about taking the side of the new government in Kyiv. Like other security services, even military elites were uncertain about what to do. And while the government called a partial mobilization on March 17 and reinstated conscription in May, the results were rather modest. By August 2014 the armed forces had reportedly managed to raise and deploy a mere two new battalions to war (Hladka et al. 2017, 165).

It has proven tricky for the military to rely on conscription in contexts characterized by domestic division. It is not only diffi-

cult to actually mobilize forces but also to ascertain whether those mobilized will be politically loyal. Creating a politically unreliable force may prove outright counterproductive. It is better to have no force than one that seeks to thwart the mission.

In Ukraine the trouble began with the partial mobilization that included the reinstating of an 18-month-long conscription terminated by Yanukovych. No doubt influenced by societal divisions and negative views about the armed forces, state efforts to mobilize led to massive draft dodging and protests (Luhn 2015). President Petro Poroshenko later confirmed that no less than a third of those conscripted in the first wave deserted after being deployed to the east. Conscription remained unpopular, as many young men simply saw little point in dying for what they perceived as yet another corrupt government. Even after extensive reforms, and deploying soldiers to aggressively pursue draft dodgers on the streets and on public transport during the three mobilization waves in 2014, the sixth wave in August 2015 reached only about half of the required number of conscripts (Gora 2015).

Considering that the head of the Maidan self-defense, Andriy Parubiy, was appointed as the secretary of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine by the new government, there were ready links between the Maidan activists and the state. While some Maidan activists had already been mobilized through the National Guard, Parubiy announced on May 6 that all members should sign up for incorporation into the MoD and MoIA structures, lest they lose any relation with the self-defense units that had provided security during the Maidan (Ukraine Crisis Media Center 2014). As noted, many members of these units subsequently joined the volunteer battalions.

There were clear benefits with highly motivated forces like the Maidan activists, which can be contrasted with conscripts who were coerced to serve. As suggested by their self-mobilization alone, the patriotic dedication of volunteers was never in doubt. At minimum, the preference of one political alternative over that offered by the separatists must have played a role in mobilization. Other volunteers explained how they saw this mobilization

as nothing less than a “civilizational” choice between “good and evil.” Burzhua called the alternatives “pan-Asian-authoritarian dictatorship with no regard for human freedom” and “Western-style individual freedom.” For Sergey mobilization was something he “should do” when faced with the alternatives of Western or Russian civilization, where the latter possessed global ambitions. (Even some researchers perceive the conflict through a similar Huntingtonian lense; see Kuzio 2018; Matveeva 2018.) The most common way to describe volunteers in Ukraine is to call them “patriots,” which immediately implies an underlying ideology that corresponds with the idea that militias are the opposite of insurgents. Ulrich Schneckener sees that militias defend “an established political and social order and claim to protect it from internal to external threats and enemies.” Whereas militias are characterized by “status quo-oriented violence” and can rely on some sort of “borrowed legitimacy” from the state, rebels per definition seek to challenge the status quo and the state (Schneckener 2017, 799–800). Considering that even the anti-Maidan forces initially focused on self-defense (Arel and Driscoll 2023, 142), the sides were less clear-cut in Ukraine.

The volunteer battalions possessed a potentially broader, and in any case more complex, political role than is typically assumed of militias as pro-government forces. The Spirit of 2014 implies that the difference between militias and rebels might not be as diametric. The volunteer battalions were revolutionary, rather than conservative. Neither should “political and social order,” mentioned above, be equated with state and society. Militias do not necessarily have a positive relationship with the state, nor do they necessarily represent a significant part of a society. After all, many militias mobilize as a defensive response against not only rebels (Jentsch, Kalyvas, and Schubiger 2015), but equally states (Ferme and Hoffman 2004). Militias may thus seek to defend and further political and social order that goes against state interests. It may thus be as difficult to distinguish militias and rebels from each other.

The interests of those parts of society represented by the volunteers and the state did not perfectly align in Ukraine. While

the volunteer battalions presented an opportunity for the new government in Kyiv, they also constituted a threat. As noted, the first wave of volunteers came straight from the Maidan, and were infused with the Spirit of 2014. For them, taking up arms against separatism was merely a continuation of the same struggle which had led to the revolution. In other words, what had begun at the Maidan still needed conclusion. Among this group were those with far-right sympathies. Evidence suggests that far-right activists used disproportionate violence in relation to their small numbers during the Maidan protests (Ishchenko 2016; Yekelchik 2020, 95–96). This use of force first at the Maidan and later as part of volunteer battalions gave these previously fringe actors popular legitimacy (Kudelia 2016, 23; Umland 2019, 108). The second important group of volunteers were those from the east, especially Donetsk and Luhansk, who rose to oppose the growing separatism. As opportunities for nonviolent resistance faded, some resorted to guerrilla action before leaving to join volunteer battalions and other government forces. Finally, it is also important to mention that even some who had opposed the Maidan volunteered to defend Ukraine from what they perceived as Russian aggression. The existence of an external enemy contributed to growing polarization, which to an extent helped to mend lesser internal divisions.

Whatever the reason for mobilizing against separatism, the volunteers came with their own agendas. They represented nearly the whole spectrum of politics, even if they leaned more to the right than the left in the manner to be expected of military volunteers. Some battalions were sponsored by political parties and oligarchs, who remain deeply involved in Ukrainian politics. Even the battalions perceived ideologically contained very different kinds of combatants, who often made strange bedfellows. For instance, people who had been on opposite sides during the Maidan found the threat of Russian invasion a good enough reason to cooperate, while as noted earlier, Jews and Muslims fought alongside people sporting symbols associated with the far right. Some described this volunteer brand of nationalism as inclusive, as anyone willing

to fight for Ukraine regardless of class, ethnicity, nationality, religion, or sexual orientation was considered a patriot.

In the end two things united those in the volunteer battalions: the urgency to protect Ukrainian territorial sovereignty, and the gains of the revolution that made political reform possible. A hierarchy of factors behind this cohesion can be observed, where macro-level factors dominate over lower-level ones. Faced with the immediate threat of Russian military occupation and the return of Yanukovych's cronyism, in the short term the armed struggle had to be prioritized over political reforms. Nevertheless, the view that the state had failed to protect its territorial sovereignty served as a bitter reminder of the necessity of future reforms. The very existence of the volunteer battalions proved this necessity, itself evidence and a reminder of state failure.

From the perspective of the volunteer battalion fighters interviewed, internal security forces disgraced themselves at the Maidan, leading many to refer to the police with the Russian word *mysor* (*musor*, trash). In 2014 Berkut in particular but also other law enforcement bodies in the east appeared to be a "fifth column." Deemed demoralized by the revolution, they were perceived to be waiting for a Russian invasion, if not to be actively supporting separatism (Hladka et al. 2017, 67, 80, 89). Witnessing a worsening political and security situation and the capture of Sloviansk by Girkin's force in early April, the member of parliament and Avakov's adviser Anton Herashchenko gave a gloomy description of the situation:

The army was a slow starter. There were constant attempts of sabotage there. The commanders kept telling us: we didn't have martial law declared in the country, which means that, according to the law, the army had no right to do anything ... we didn't have any troops there [the ATO zone], but only 2,000 police officers who refused to obey orders, and who were not ready to retake the seized buildings and defend their Motherland. (Quoted in Hladka et al. 2017, 68)

Law enforcement officers understandably experienced the circumstances as more complex. One police officer explained the situation in Donetsk during the last days of April by noting that, no matter what happened, the police would lose:

If Russia makes good on its threats to invade eastern Ukraine, the police there could face a war tribunal for using force against civilians. If Russia doesn't invade, the Kiev authorities could still turn them into scapegoats. The last time the police got orders to fire on civilians in Ukraine, during the revolution in February, a dozen officers wound up facing charges for mass murder. (Shuster 2014)

This fear of accountability for the events at the Maidan was deemed to have demoralized all law enforcement bodies, which the new government could hence not rely on (Hladka et al. 2017, 8). Another complication was pointed out by Sergey, who emphasized how police officers lived in local communities. As some of these communities supported separatism, the police were likely to have neighbors, friends, and family whom they were now expected to resist. As a result, there was little many police felt they could do, even if they wanted to.

Combined with the paralysis of the army, the state was left with few means it could employ against the rising separatism. Violence between those who supported and opposed separatism soon escalated. On April 29 the police failed to protect a pro-unity march in Donetsk that was violently disrupted. Increasing violence narrowed opportunities for a peaceful solution.

When asked whether the Donbas Battalion cooperated with the local police in early May, Semenchenko answered:

We do not. At this time, in their current form, I don't see them being a part of the Ukrainian state. I envision the current form of the Ukrainian state transforming into state the way it is supposed to be and that is why I am here ... When it comes to ordinary policemen, I can't say we are cooperating with them, there are too many traitors in their ranks. (Quoted in Politika 2014)

In addition to highlighting the politicization of the Ukrainian security forces, Semenchenko's answer can be interpreted as also underlining the political nature of the volunteer battalions. As already noted, for Semenchenko the struggle against separatism was inherently linked with the revolution and the anticipated reforms in Kyiv. Commenting on the situation in the capital, Semenchenko explained that while it was necessary to stop Ukraine plunging into "lawless chaos," he still did not "like the current government in Ukraine, and in that sense we have something in common with pro-Russia separatists" (Politika 2014). In Semenchenko's telling, the volunteer battalions questioned the capacity of the state to maintain sovereignty, while competing with it for both authority and legitimacy.

As Sviatoslav explained, while the Maidan Revolution resulted in the overthrow of the topmost layer of the state, the system itself was not affected. Many of the same corrupt police officers, judges, and government bureaucrats remained in office, and supposedly continued their past practices. The obsolete legal system remained unchanged, as did much of the political environment. As a result, Sviatoslav and other volunteer battalion fighters were "fighting against the state as well as Russia." At least one unit went as far as to start hiding weapons in the ATO zone in order to retrieve them after separatism was defeated. If necessary, these arms would be used in Kyiv against the government. These plans came to naught as the war prolonged, and as the areas the caches were in fell under separatist control in the fall of 2014. Because of such attitudes, it should not be surprising that several volunteers described being stopped and searched by police at roadblocks as they were leaving the ATO zone to visit their homes or Kyiv.

The volunteer battalions were more pro-Ukrainian than pro-government (Malyarenko and Galbreath 2016, 116). The relationship among the government, the military, and the volunteer battalions was unstable and characterized by deep mistrust. With some justification, the government saw the volunteers as an internal threat, comparable to the external threat posed by those perceived to invade the country (Furmanyuk 2015). That many who

mobilized to the volunteer battalions had already successfully executed one revolution and, after being armed, threatened another, limited the government's pursuit of independent policy (Sakwa 2015, 159). The volunteers were not merely a means; because of their political nature and capacity for violence, they even effectively influenced available political ends and the ways to reach them.

While the government saw no other alternative but to rely on the volunteer battalions, the armed forces opposed their legalization. Military elites harbored deep suspicion and mistrust toward the "wild" volunteer battalions. From their perspective, these consisted of ultra-right radicals with little military experience. Whatever short-term benefits came from working with them, they would wreak havoc and infringe on what the military considered its professional territory. It did not help that many volunteers perceived the military command as careerists who were out of touch with reality. Facing in the military the worst forms of Soviet bureaucracy and mentality – colloquially known by the Russian slang word for Soviet, *совок* (*sovok*), but most often simply called "stupidity" – the volunteers offered a promise of if not replacing, then at least reforming the existing system (Puglisi 2015a, 14–16).

When the war started, the volunteers had little time for *sovok*, which they most often deemed to manifest as inefficient bureaucracy and lack of initiative. Success depended on improvisation and retaining initiative, as well as adaptation and innovation – qualities the volunteers were forced to excel in. With limited state authority and coercion, in the early stages of the conflict the volunteers had almost complete freedom to do what they wanted. Yet in fact their potential was far greater due to their inherently political role in a thoroughly politicized post-revolutionary environment. By questioning existing power structures, they offered the prospect of something much more than mere adaptation. Some, like Yuri Bereza, the founder of Dnipro-1, believed that the volunteer battalions were prototypes for both the future army and police. The new model would not be corrupt, lack in morale, or fail in its duties to protect Ukrainian citizens (Perevoznik and

Kondratova 2014; see also Butusov 2014). Understandably, this threatened the existing hierarchies and authority of the new and the old guard, who would have little of it. In Burzhua's words (spoken in 2018), following the Maidan, "Ukraine witnessed red name painted on blue and yellow" – that is, institutions that had existed since Soviet times did not experience deep reform, but were subjected to mere cosmetic changes in the new Ukraine. Ukraine had not witnessed revolution at independence in 1991, nor during the Orange Revolution in 2004. The slow pace of reforms and societal developments during the first years following the Maidan Revolution also failed to convince all Ukrainians about fundamental positive change in the Ukrainian state and society.

The politicized role of the volunteer battalions influenced even the conflict dynamics in Donbas, with Russian journalists especially emphasizing and often exaggerating the influence of the far right among volunteer battalions. The equation of volunteer battalions with fascists nevertheless resulted in real fears in Donbas (Kudelia 2016; Arel and Driscoll 2023). Yet it would be an exaggeration to say that everyone in Right Sector or any other volunteer battalion harbored extremist views, or that any battalion in 2014 was thoroughly ideologized in the way suggested. During the First World War, Emil Lederer (2006, 262) observed that "the nation has become an ideology of the state in particular." In a similar way, the identity of the pro-Ukrainian volunteers coalesced around the aims of protecting Ukrainian sovereignty. The main goal of all Ukrainian nationalists has been summarized as liberation of "Kyiv from the Kremlin's hegemony" (Shekhovtsov and Umland 2014, 60). Yet, as Sviatoslav emphasized, this struggle was not merely seen as one between Ukraine and Russia, but as one for "normalcy" and civilization. In this framing, the struggle often came to concern not merely Ukraine, but even the West.

While this kind of broader framing makes it difficult to contain the war within a strict nationalist framework, the monikers such as nationalists and patriots associated with the volunteers nevertheless effectively meant that they were defined against "pro-Russian separatists," if not Russians. While this allowed broad

mobilization, in the absence of this “other,” the differences among the volunteers became too great. Nowhere was this more apparent than during local and parliamentary elections, when veterans never constituted anything close to a united constituency.

Nevertheless, the volunteers’ real or imagined connections with extremist views and brutality contributed to polarization, and the escalation of the conflict. Polarization is also apparent in some volunteer narratives. Discussing how volunteers could commandeer cars from separatists, one journalist noted that it was unclear who counted as one in the first place. Ultimately, if one included everyone suspected of having links with the separatists, it would encompass 90 percent of the population of Donbas. Several volunteers describe threatening situations with hostile locals when traveling to or from their battalions in the spring of 2014. As will be analyzed in [Chapter 6](#), establishing and maintaining order often resulted in violent suppression.

Equipment

Because of the ambiguous situation and legal sensitivities, firearms constituted a tricky issue for volunteer battalions, and the most immediate problem was inadequate supply. This issue became increasingly pressing as violence escalated. While Maidan protestors had mainly employed bricks and Molotov cocktails, they eventually resorted to firearms. Aside from the “little green men” in Crimea, it was when separatists captured Sloviansk in early April that they were first armed. From then on things rapidly escalated: by the end of April, separatists employed tanks against government forces. Nevertheless, as late as early May 2014, in clashes in Odesa bricks, handmade grenades, and Molotov cocktails prevailed over the few firearms. Initially, volunteers who manned checkpoints were armed with civilian weapons. As with the rest of volunteers’ equipment, little was standardized. According to Kazhan, it was difficult to mobilize without arms. With fewer firearms than fighters, the Aidar Battalion was initially divided into two parts when it first moved to the front in May. The two halves

took turns to wage war, handing over arms to the other half when relieved for rest.

Unsurprisingly, the main source of arms was always the state. While incorporation into the state structures allowed official supply of firearms, these were occasionally acquired from the same sources through interpersonal relations (Stasyuk 2018). One Azov volunteer described how his unit had initially confiscated weapons from law enforcement officials, but later received pistols, shotguns, and some Kalashnikovs through one of the local oligarchs. After Azov joined the MoIA it received weapons from the police. The problem was that half of the police making the delivery were former Berkut officers, who may well have harbored anti-Maidan sentiments. This encounter turned into a tense face-off, where all participants were armed. Later deliveries were made without Berkut, and began to include not only Kalashnikovs but also some RPGs. According to another volunteer, the MoIA only began to supply machine guns and grenades to the battalions after a plea was made on a television talk show to arm the hitherto “virtually unarmed” volunteers (Chernyshev 2015).

Even then the quality of gear varied. For instance, Burzhua recalled how his unit received “really old AKMs with only 2 full clips of ammo.” Vadim’s Azov unit received seemingly random boxes sealed in some warehouse, with correspondingly random items inside – including gas masks and decades-old timers for explosives they did not possess. And while there were several old Maxim machine guns employed in different sectors of the war, Azov also received three 100 mm BS-3 Soviet field guns from 1944. Lovingly called “babushkas,” or grandmothers, because of their age, the guns were deemed useful but difficult to maintain before old repair manuals were located in an antique shop.

Thanks to their closer links to civil society and perceived corruption within the armed forces and other state structures, aside from arms, volunteer battalions were soon better equipped than their state equivalents. Sergey described that even in late 2015 when one could expect the worst to be over, army soldiers looked like “hobos” when compared with volunteers. The military never-

theless remained an important source of ammunition, grenades, and even firearms – which soldiers were often willing to trade for food, equipment, and even woolen socks (Löfroos 2022, 174–75). These narratives clearly contain a fair share of criticism of the capabilities and low morale of the armed forces. When soldiers in flip-flops were willing to trade their boots for food, it is plausible to assume that they had little intention to fight the war. While volunteers felt that they were scorned by generals, they often enjoyed sympathy from lower-level commanders. Some local commanders even covertly gave or borrowed arms reported lost to volunteers located in the vicinity.

As non-state actors, volunteer organizations could circumvent official bans enacted in some European countries that forbade them from selling equipment to Ukraine. Non-state status could nevertheless also cause them trouble. For instance, when caught by Ukrainian customs officers with a carload of body armor and helmets, one group of volunteers were told that a person can legally only bring in one suit of armor and one helmet. Often, sympathy for the cause or the occasional small bribe helped resolve these situations.

Some military equipment was nevertheless outright smuggled into the country. Such equipment reportedly included thermal devices and rifle scopes provided by the United States to its allies in Afghanistan and Iraq, which had subsequently been sold to other countries and were now bought by volunteers to be used in Ukraine. Some volunteers sought out weapons collectors for firearms that could be reactivated, as well as magazines and ammunition belts. While one volunteer admitted to smuggling ammunition from Germany and Poland, several others spoke of unconfirmed rumors about the running of firearms. Such measures nevertheless became largely unnecessary after the incorporation of most volunteer battalions into the MoD and the MoIA structures. Up until the Battle of Ilovaisk in August 2014, where the intervention of Russian mechanized forces caused the combined Ukrainian forces their worst defeat of the war, volunteers collected trophy weapons from defeated separatists. They occa-

sionally took these even from Ukrainian army units that had fled. According to Kazhan, Aidar collected a lot of equipment – including tanks – abandoned by retreating soldiers. The armed forces later asked the battalion to return its property. Aidar's refusal to do so led to a new motto: "it was not us who took it, we will never return it." Despite the motto, a frontline barter economy saw trophies exchange hands between units, with little interference from above.

Weapons were initially the only thing the state provided to the volunteers. Mirroring the Soviet experience of the Second World War when civilians were encouraged to adopt battalions (Merridale 2005), the rest of the volunteers' logistics came from either private donors or local authorities (Stasyuk 2018, 175). Strong societal support is clear in Burzhua's and Sasha's narratives. When Sasha finally received his mobilization letter to the army, he bought his equipment – including a tactical vest with ballistic plates and a Kevlar helmet – with assistance from friends and colleagues. As the call sign he received from his comrades suggests, Burzhua – "bourgeois" – was wealthier. Like many upper-middle-class volunteers, he could buy his own gear, even if Dnipro-1 received support in the form of other necessities. Some volunteers told their friends who had good jobs to keep working and earn money in order to support those who left to the war. Some donated a portion of their salaries to the war effort. Family members often sent kit to their nearest and dearest. Others began to collect everything from letters of support from school classes to homemade food to equipment, and to take these to the volunteer battalions and army units deployed to the ATO zone.

Here civilian volunteers like Roman and Vitaliy stepped in. At the beginning of the war, they both perceived the situation as critical. The army was woefully unprepared to fight, and the state overall in need of assistance. In order to buy time for the armed forces to mobilize, in the short term it was the volunteer battalions that had to hold the line. Much of their equipment and support came from civil society through organizations led by people like Roman and Vitaliy.

Like many others, even Roman and Vitaliy believed the war would be short. Initially, neither had plans to start a big organization, especially as the summer offensive in 2014 began to capture ground from separatists. The defeat at Ilovaisk, however, made it clear that the war would become prolonged. As donations to the war effort grew, Roman's apartment increasingly became a warehouse. Faced with the prospect of being evicted by the donations, Roman had to find an office. With this office, his organization became a hub for other volunteers who came up with their own projects. Someone arrived with the idea of providing drones, and taught both volunteers and soldiers how to operate them. Transportation was a problem especially in the early days of the war, with limited operations. Civilian donations helped in this regard. Azov received a BTR-152 armored personnel carrier built in 1951 from a businessman who bought it from a cinematic studio and used it in military simulations. Roman's office staged the founding of another project, providing transportation such as cars, and including fixed sport utility vehicles with turrets that could be armed. By the end of 2018, over 150 cars and hundreds of drones had been provided to combatants.

Another volunteer with knowledge of medical affairs told how she was horrified by the lack of medical facilities, training, and equipment. No field hospitals existed when the war started, requiring all seriously injured combatants to be airlifted to a hospital in Dnipropetrovsk (from 2016 onwards Dnipro). Massive bleeding was a common, yet often preventable, cause of fatalities. In addition to training, by 2019 the provision of modern first aid kits continued. Roman's organization alone supplied 15,000 units. Vitaliy in turn emphasized "causing trouble to the other side" and reducing casualties through causing them first. As a result, his organization focused on providing thermal rifle scopes to the front lines. Considering that these devices cost \$3,000 early in the war, the Ukrainian military could ill afford to buy them in bulk. Both Roman and Vitaliy readily admitted that these kinds of volunteer efforts would have benefited from better coordination.

In addition to direct support from civil society, political parties and oligarchs too loomed behind volunteer battalions. Matsuzato (2017, 185) argues that it was the oligarch Ihor Kolomoisky who proposed that the empty government coffers necessitated nominating oligarchs as governors, who would then pay for the defense of their regions. It has even been claimed that it was only after Kolomoisky's efforts that Avakov decided to support the creation of the volunteer battalions (Umland 2019, 110). Kolomoisky – the newly appointed governor of Dnipropetrovsk – and his business associates funded Dnipro-1, Dnipro-2, Donbas, and, in their early phases, Shakhtarsk (formerly Ukraina) and Azov battalions, as well as two territorial defense units at least until October 2014 (Fedorenko and Umland 2022, 245–46; Umland 2019, 110). Sergei Taruta, another oligarch, now governor of Donetsk, helped the formation of Azov “with organizational activities and logistical resources” (personal communication; see also Fedorenko and Umland 2022, 243).

These kinds of direct connections to finance resulted in discrepancies between battalions. For instance, while the volunteers registered to the special police battalions received a monthly salary of 3,000 Ukrainian hryvnias, the members of Dnipro-1 received an additional 16,000 hryvnias, reportedly straight from Kolomoisky. This amounted to roughly \$1,500, which far surpassed what field officers of the armed forces received. Even the defenders of Mariupol were perceived to be better equipped than most other volunteers as they had a whole city financing them. Taruta claims to have coordinated the defense of the city in the spring and summer of 2014, and to have spent \$50 million with his brother Alexander for this purpose (personal communication). While salaries caused a few observers to call volunteer battalions mercenaries, it must be emphasized that the kinds of salaries paid to Dnipro-1 were an exception, not a rule.

Some support came from unexpected sources. Kazhan described how patriotic sex workers provided free services to volunteers, as did drug dealers who gave them cannabis. In the early stages of the war the criminal underworld provided them

with small quantities of arms, ammunition, and grenades (Hladka et al. 2017, 108). Aside from financial and material support and training, volunteers also helped reform the old military procurement procedures in order to tackle systematic corruption. Units fighting for Ukraine could propose projects that would improve their fighting capabilities, which were then crowdsourced online (Hunter 2018; Sanders 2017, 40–41), both by volunteer organizations and the armed forces.

While bank account numbers posted online and personal relations were the most common ways to collect funds, services such as PayPal allowed anyone with a credit card anywhere in the world to support the war effort. Organizations such as the People's Project permitted crowdfunding for larger purchases: projects were recommended from below, and funding could be pledged online. When enough had been pledged, the volunteer organizations initiated the project. Transparency was provided throughout the process through posting receipts, photos, and signed documents of delivery online.

This system was not perfect. Assistance was no doubt exploited for personal gain, and volunteers describe how some political figures delivered unnecessary things just to get publicity. This volunteer support was nevertheless absolutely necessary. As Ukrainian production of military gear kicked off and the state began to allocate more funds to procurement, the material situation gradually improved. This meant that the need for volunteer support decreased, and moved from crucial items to what were considered luxury ones, as well as more specialized training. Still, the most modern equipment continued to come from volunteers. No strict rules existed as to what kind of equipment could be used in service. Because of the variety of equipment, Buddha – a conscript who served in the seventh and final wave of conscripts deployed to the ATO zone in 2016 – noted that his officer described the overall appearance of his unit as “Hungarian partisans.” According to Buddha, by 2016 volunteers stopped providing helmets and uniforms to those on the front. While he received most of his equipment from the armed forces, this equipment was not

always of good quality. For instance, combat shirts marketed as flame resistant were anything but. In addition to volunteer support, Buddha bought some of his own equipment, much of which he left upon departure to contract soldiers who stayed in the ATO zone.

Just like with the volunteer battalions, the civilian volunteers helped fill the gaps the state was unable or unwilling to. While greatly diminished after the signing of the second Minsk ceasefire agreement in February 2015 (Zaremba 2017, 56), their crowd-funding efforts continued: for instance, they provided paramedical help and tactical medical training to the front lines, repaired optical equipment behind them, and arranged summer camps and financial support for the families of fallen soldiers, as well as psychological help for veterans. Ultimately, all these deficiencies emphasized how much the war cost Ukraine, and the limitations of the state capacity to alleviate suffering. While the volunteer efforts helped to fill gaps, they may simultaneously have reduced the urgency for systemic change as the military was “induced ... to rely on volunteers rather than demand the state to change its practices” (Zaremba 2017, 89).

Uniforms illustrate some of the dilemmas posed by deficiencies in supply. As Sviatoslav noted, the first Aidar operations were conducted with Kalashnikovs, but without uniforms. Some volunteers wore slippers, most sweatpants. The immediate solution was for volunteers to buy surplus uniforms from abroad. As a result, volunteers and even army soldiers wore a hodgepodge of old British, German, Russian, and US uniforms. This caused two problems. The first was that the mixture of uniforms with assorted flags stitched on them was used in enemy propaganda to portray the volunteers as a force of NATO, which remained deeply unpopular in Donbas. While the flags were later removed, the damage was already done. The second problem was that while the uniforms could help with camouflage, the fact that the separatists solved their supply in the exact same manner meant that the uniforms did little to distinguish friend from foe. Friendly fire remained a challenge, with colored ribbons and duct tape provid-

ing the most immediate solution. According to Sviatoslav, duct tape became mandatory when Aidar began to operate with the army. This was far from a foolproof system. Without coordination from above, different units used different colors, frustrating identification. While friendly fire was reduced, it was never completely eliminated. As always, the result was loss of morale.

While it took long into 2015 until the combined Ukrainian forces were uniformly clad, wearing the same uniforms may on occasion have saved lives. Some volunteers from the Donbas Battalion captured in Ilovaisk simply removed their patches and pretended to be conscript soldiers in order to escape the more brutal treatment reserved for volunteers. Army reconnaissance did not wear Ukrainian flag badges. One small reconnaissance unit was dressed in the same Russian camouflage as the separatists who found them deep inside their territory. The commander of this unit was thus able to convince their enemies that they belonged to the same side. The unit made it safely back to the government side to tell the tale.

Finally, communication among units remained a challenge, and limited the possibilities for coordination. With insufficient radios, Olexa laughed that the cooperation among volunteers and between volunteers and the armed forces was based on mobile phones in the spirit of “Nokia, connecting people.” While this kind of horizontal communication increased initiative and flexibility, it also reduced the control and situational awareness of higher commands. Speed was no doubt of the essence, as this kind of communication was not encrypted. As the recorded separatist conversations released by the SBU and Joint Investigation Team that investigated the downing of the passenger plane MH-17 prove, it was not difficult to listen in on unencrypted mobile phone traffic.

Training

It was also necessary for the volunteers to be able to use the weapons and the equipment they possessed. According to the survey of the volunteer battalions, only 17 percent of their members had

previous military experience (Bulakh, Senkiv, and Teperik 2017, 11). This figure not only feels high for early volunteers, but, in any case, requires qualification. While several (but few of those interviewed) had gone through conscription, they complained that they had only shot a few rounds during their training. A common understanding of conscription was that it had to do with everything except actual military training, such as building summer houses for their commanders. It was understandable that most had done their best to avoid the draft that led to what they understood as “slavery.” The family of one interviewee had, for instance, given a television to a doctor in exchange for a diagnosis which exempted him from service. The consensus was that only losers went to the armed forces. Even Aleksandr, a Ukrainian serviceman, believed that before the war forced the military to become patriotic, it had been “corrupted and [a] waste of time.” Taras, a university graduate, described how his studies in 2003–2005 included a few hours of military training twice a week. He felt the studies were academic in nature, with the practical focus on marching. They only once went to the field, where they shot nine rounds. More worryingly, even the academic parts felt rather Soviet for him. For instance, all their potential enemies belonged to NATO. Likely because all the teaching was done by old officers who had served in the Soviet armed forces, Russia never became a topic for discussion.

As already noted, the annexation of Crimea caused many to seek private arms training, often provided by veterans. Even so, actual fighting skills remained limited. A revealing example comes from Sergey, who reminisced about a two-hour night-time firefight with a hedgehog, which only ended after a grenade killed the animal. As the conflict escalated, the more intellectually minded volunteers downloaded US military manuals circulating online. Virtually all watched tactical videos from YouTube. As Kazhan put it, “like women who learn new recipes, we learned to fight.” Civilian skills also transferred to military tasks. Volunteers, for instance, created software for controlling the movement of suspects at checkpoints. When Aidar acquired mortars, an app

was designed to help with targeting. Such adaptability, flexibility, and initiative were prominent features in volunteer narratives. As noted, these were qualities they perceived the armed forces to have lacked in abundance.

While training was later organized, the overall quality was deemed low (Stasyuk 2018). Before Ilovaisk, it was common for volunteer battalions to welcome anyone with previous knowledge of weapons and warfare as a trainer. Foreigners with military experience – not least Georgians who had fought against Russia in 2008 – played prominent roles. Yet foreign assistance was always in short supply, while language barriers understandably complicated matters. Language also became an issue for Ukrainians who fought the war. The Maidan had made many abandon Russian and adopt Ukrainian instead. But as Sviatoslav noted, there was no time to think in war: those not used to Ukrainian rapidly reverted back to Russian or *Surzhyk*, a mix of the two languages. The irony of the situation was that Russian aggression made those fighting for Ukraine return to Russian language.

As the conflict intensified, rookies were typically advised by those Ukrainians with more experience. Often these trainers' military experience was limited to mere weeks of fighting. That training became prioritized is illustrated by the way it was given even during active hostilities. For instance, Olexa described a long week during which he trained newcomers – many of them middle-aged – by day, and participated in assault operations by night.

After the defeat in Ilovaisk the morale of the combined Ukrainian forces plummeted. Some volunteer combatants describe excessive drinking, with one group breaking into shops to get alcohol. Ilovaisk highlighted the failures of coordination among the forces on the government side. Training was deemed central for improving the situation, especially among the volunteer battalions (Klymenko 2018). Following Ilovaisk and the first cease-fire agreement in Minsk, both Ukrainian armed forces and Russian soldiers who worked with separatists began train-and-equip missions (Kofman et al. 2017, 44–45). Many volunteers described how they were moved to polygons – training areas – and for the

first time provided with systematic training. Western countries began to provide training only after the second ceasefire agreement in 2015. Even Ukrainian civilian volunteers stepped up their efforts to train forces. For instance, in December 2019 Vitaliy's organization for the most part targeted armed forces personnel: 300 were constantly being trained for mine safety, 400 as snipers, and 2,000 as artillerists and mortarmen.

Overall, volunteers were motivated to fight. As one trainer put it, this resulted in long debriefs, as the volunteers were keen to learn from their mistakes. This kind of motivation was understood to distinguish the soldiers of the armed forces and the volunteers. General Khomchak described the difference between the MoD territorial defense battalions and the volunteer battalions as being that the people in the former "served against their will" whereas the latter joined "answering the call of their hearts" (quoted in Hladka et al. 2017, 92). Several volunteer informants emphasized how they wanted to win the war, whereas they perceived the military to view it merely as a job (see also Ponomarenko 2017c). Ultimately, this difference meant that the volunteer battalions constituted not only an armed but, first and foremost, a political force.

Assessing the Volunteer Battalions

Ultimately, the importance of the volunteers needs to be seen in relation to the weakness of their opponents, as well as the Ukrainian state. In the immediate aftermath of the revolution that deepened cleavages in the Ukrainian society, the state was simply unable to protect its sovereignty against even weak attempts at separatism. In this situation the responsibility to defend Ukraine was assumed by volunteers. If anything, their lack of resources added to their reputation. To give only one example, because of the material onslaught they faced, the volunteer defenders who held Donetsk airport for 242 days were dubbed superhuman "cyborgs." By the time they were defeated on January 21, 2015, the airport had been turned to rubble. In the absence of material means, will

prevailed. This last section assesses first the volunteers' military capabilities, before turning to discuss their political and psychological importance in the early stages of the war.

With the benefit of hindsight many volunteers are open about the battalions' limited military capabilities. Whereas commanders like Bereza and Semenchenko may have entertained grander designs for the volunteer battalions, fighters typically compare themselves not with state militaries but with other non-state actors. For instance, Burzhua likened the volunteers to privateers and pirates. The volunteers who resembled privateers were sanctioned to wage war on behalf of the state. Those who were more like pirates did not ask for permission to do what they wanted. Even Kazhan felt that the volunteer battalions "were like ISIS [Islamic State] – wild idiots from the desert." Both agreed that volunteer battalions were needed in the early phases of the war. But as time passed, the volunteer battalions risked turning into "semi-criminal enterprises." With the military assuming greater responsibility for the war that had in any case de-escalated due to the two ceasefire agreements, battalions had more time to engage in shady deals and other kinds of dubious activities. Although they were not willing to go into much detail, several volunteer battalion fighters talked about participating in protecting businesses and voting stations in exchange for payment. They also blackmailed, looted, and transported (and likely sold) goods, including arms. One volunteer noted that that he had seen "absurd" amounts of cash during the war. While waging war never comes cheap, profiteering was implied (for an unverified account of Azov, see Colborne 2022, 88–100). In this regard, neither Kazhan nor Burzhua was sad to see the state assert control over the war. That said, and as discussed in [Chapter 5](#), few volunteers were happy with the way the government dealt with the issue.

Even if departing more from society than the state, it is remarkable how the volunteer battalions reflected traditional understandings of war. A comparable case where an understanding of a problem underlies finding a solution to it can be found in the formation of the Israeli military. Seeking statehood, the nas-

cent Jewish state would face confrontation on a wholly different level than before. The existing loose forces – the volunteer “non-army” filled with people “with good will” and “hidden capacities” would not stand a chance against Arab militaries that would seek to thwart Zionist plans for independent statehood (Cohen 2003, 143–44). While paramilitaries favored lightly armed platoons or companies, the future army was based on a British model with brigades as standard units, equipped with modern weaponry like airplanes, artillery, and tanks (Cohen 2003, 146–53). Just like the Israeli military planners and despite their self-comparisons to non-state actors, the Ukrainian volunteers’ analysis of the problem and their preferred solution, also largely followed traditional conventions of war.

While similar influence of transnational norms of conventional warfare have previously been discussed with state militaries, even when the upshot harms rather than aids capabilities (Farrell 2007), Ukrainian volunteers too were affected by them. Considering that separatists came from the same cultural context, it is not surprising that these conventions were shared by all belligerents (Käihkö 2021). The choice of the term “battalion” itself suggests a certain regularity in thinking regarding the range of alternatives for creating force. Few entertained ideas of guerrilla resistance for long as battalions assumed traditional forms of military organization, donned assorted uniforms, and adopted names and chevrons to distinguish themselves from both civilians and other battalions. Some early battalions even wore badges that identified themselves as members of the armed forces. This further implied that volunteer battalions were performing traditional tasks typically associated with the state, as did the familiar way these tasks were performed. In this sense the volunteers merely extended the Maidan state to fighting war. As emphasized by Ruslan, a Right Sector volunteer, acting outside Western conventions of war was not only a foreign and outlandish idea, but would furthermore have directly played into Russian propaganda efforts. Adherence to existing conventions contributed to limiting the use of force in this conflict, which took a rather traditional form (Freedman

2019). Creation of force again had a major influence on both its control and use.

Despite the familiar imagery and terminology, one should nevertheless exercise caution when superimposing Western military practices on what was a much more ad hoc and messy reality. The combined Ukrainian forces were overall disorganized. One foreign volunteer with military background described that as late as mid-2015 the only formation Ukrainian combatants could manage was “pile of shit”: the Ukrainians lumped close together in groups of 10–30. Several years later, one NATO trainer sent to assist the Ukrainian military had to scrap his plans of focusing on company-level tactics and begin with the most elementary two-soldier fireteams. These issues were not solved by February 2022 – or February 2023 (Grant 2023). It should hence not be surprising that things were much worse for the volunteers in 2014.

As Kazhan explained, the volunteers were on the whole bad soldiers. With limited training, limited arms, and limited and rather traditional ideas about what to do, the volunteers compensated with motivation and willpower. The twin mottos of Aidar – “bravery and stupidity” and “dementia and courage” – emphasize the maverick way its fighters waged war. Some volunteer fighters described the war as a gamble in a game whose rules they did not fully understand. The upshot was the blurring of the boundary between bravery and stupidity, and not seldom escalation and surprise (for one foreign volunteer’s account, see Löfroos 2022).

Volunteers overall performed well against similarly ad hoc opponents on the separatist side. During the Ukrainian summer offensive in 2014, volunteer battalions began to rely on the military for artillery and tank support. The separatists were destitute, and were only saved by the direct intervention of Russian regular forces, who outgunned the volunteer battalions in particular, but even the Ukrainian regulars. Following the first Minsk agreement in September 2014, the Ukrainian armed forces began to consolidate control over the war. This began the process of conventionalization, which saw the influence and importance of the volunteer battalions wane. Soon after the second Minsk agreement in

February 2015, the two sides dug in. The resulting static trench warfare spelled the end of what had been a war of movement.

The war offered overwhelmingly positive experiences for most of the volunteers interviewed, although all made the distinction between war itself and the people and action in it. While almost no one came back from the war unscathed, Sviatoslav was among those who had been wounded most severely. Yet he also emphasized the joy inherent in war: "For me it was the happiest period of my life." Olexa was not the only one who admitted that "I miss killing people. That's the beautiful part of life ... I miss it, for real." Many of the volunteers and soldiers interviewed perceive the war as a transitory phenomenon filled with adventure and anarchy. War was a time when everything was possible, and when people felt so close to each other that words became unnecessary for communication. The war offered a simple and straightforward monochrome reality. In comparison, civilian life was much more complicated. This, and the absence of psychosocial and societal support, no doubt complicated return from war.

It is remarkable how open volunteers are about their positive experiences. For most the war came in the immediate aftermath and as a continuation of the revolution, and was both quick and mobile. The volunteers' sense of adventure was possibly enhanced by the relatively low level of threat for those not involved in the main battles of Ilovaïsk, Debaltseve, and the airports of Donetsk and Luhansk. While it would be both unfair and unreasonable to diminish the threat to life and limb, the war in Donbas was marked by relatively limited casualties, at least when compared to the total wars of the 20th century. When Olexa cried over the friends he lost in the war, it was clear that even he recognized that things would have been better without the war, although not necessarily without the revolution. As proven by the material support from civil society, this was a war where the combatants enjoyed at least some legitimacy and societal support from others who recognized the necessity of protecting Ukrainian sovereignty.

For Olexa this support manifested in the letters and pictures sent by schoolchildren to those fighting the war. These pictures

were not only “cute,” but also served two important functions. First, they were a constant reminder why the war had to be fought. Olexa felt that he was a “superhero” in the eyes of the children, whom he perceived to depend on him for protection. Secondly, the children’s pictures made it difficult to forget that it was necessary to remain human in war. Asked whether this was difficult, Olexa nodded and explained that forgetting “is easy in war.” He was not the only combatant who always kept one of these pictures with him. When fighters stayed for extended periods of time somewhere, they often put up these letters and pictures on walls.

In addition to its military role, the volunteer movement had significant political and psychological significance. When the army was retreating as generals did not want to fight, the volunteers pushed forward. As the media arm of Azov later framed these events to emphasize their patriotic credentials, “When the Ukrainian Army ran, #Azov stood up to fight for #Ukraine” (posted on X [formerly Twitter] by @Azov_News, February 25, 2017. Profile and post no longer exist). Such contrast provoked soldiers, who complained that civilians were fighting when the military was not. Incorporation of volunteers into existing structures gave opportunities for volunteers to show an example to regulars. So, not only were the volunteer battalions a military asset, but the example of unpaid volunteers also boosted morale among demoralized soldiers of the armed forces. Provocation may typically be understood as something negative and undesirable. But as Kazhan emphasized, this was not the case with the volunteer battalions in the spring of 2014.

Like rebels, even militias often end up challenging state legitimacy. After all, Western notions of legitimacy are closely connected to sovereignty, which demands claiming monopoly of force within a given territory. The sole existence of militias threatens this sovereignty, even when they do not directly challenge states – which some of the volunteer battalions did in Ukraine. Yet, as elsewhere (Schneckener 2017), even in Ukraine the state equally sought to draw legitimacy from the militias. The new government sought to align the struggles of the volunteers with its own, while

carefully keeping the volunteers separate from the armed forces in order not to anger the military. Yet even the military served to benefit from incorporating volunteers. As the volunteers performed functions traditionally ascribed to the state, integrating the battalions and their members into the discredited military brought some legitimacy to it (Bulakh, Senkiv, and Teperik 2017, 21). What in effect could be described as the society taking over from the state also concerned its civilian and police functions. As noted, some volunteers were later even brought to the police to provide oversight and to raise the law enforcements' legitimacy in the eyes of the citizenry. As the case of Sergey exemplifies, these efforts were on the whole at most partly successful.

As the war progressed, the same legitimacy was employed by previously fringe right-wing politicians. This concerns especially the three-pronged Azov movement, whose leader Andriy Bilet-sky is known for his neo-Nazi past. While many Azov veterans distanced themselves from him and his politics, Azov built its image on its military performance, and took credit for defending Ukraine. In this way, the feats of the first prong, the Azov Battalion, gave Azov political legitimacy. Soon after integration into the National Guard, the Azov Battalion was upgraded to a Special Operations Detachment of the 18th operative regiment of the National Guard that in due time constituted two motorized infantry battalions, a T-64 tank company and an artillery division. The Azov Regiment stood out because of its own organization and sources of income that allowed independent material supply. In the minds of Azov ideologues, this well-trained and equipped regiment constituted the nucleus of the future Ukrainian armed forces. Yet despite being called one of the most professional military units in Ukraine and one that strove toward NATO standards, its ideological underpinnings and doubts that it was fully under the control of the Ukrainian state kept the units for several years from engaging in combat on the front lines (focus.ua 2017). The second prong was the political movement, the Civil Corps, which in October 2016 became the National Corps. Finally, in January 2018 a National Militia emerged from the National Corps. The

Azov military symbolism was evident in all three, especially as the National Corps was not shy in its imagery to remind people of Azov's contribution in the war. A continuation of familiar ends performed by volunteer battalions in Donbas could also be seen with the National Corps – often called a militia – that seeks to “establish Ukrainian order” on the home front where the authorities were deemed unwilling or unable to do so (Coynash 2018). In 2020 the National Corps was rebranded as Centuria (Colborne 2022, 35).

While this implies that volunteer battalions continued to wield political significance, Azov remains an exception, not a rule. While Azov raised worries of radicalization of the volunteer movement, the fact that Azov did not even enjoy the support of all those who fought under its banner in 2014–15 was an indication of the difficulties of uniting veterans – who, at least judging from those interviewed, have little patience for electoral politics. While a common denominator could be found in the form of an external enemy, domestic politics posed a much more complicated environment. In the case of Azov, its marginal electoral support at the national level suggests that the main factor behind its prominence may rather be found in the close relationship between Avakov and Biletsky, formed during Avakov's governorship of Kharkiv between 2005 and 2010. It is exactly the strong relationship between a top politician and the movement that makes Azov stand out (Gomza and Zajaczkowski 2019, 782). This relationship was also pointed out by many interviewees, a few of whom equated Azov to Avakov's private army.

The volunteer battalions emerged in early 2014 to save Ukraine from separatism. Embodying the revolutionary spirit of 2014, many of them combined criticism of the state with love for Ukraine. This made them an inherently political actor, dangerous to both separatists and political and military elites in Kyiv. During the spring the volunteers enjoyed wide autonomy in waging war. They began to push back against separatism when the state was unable or unwilling to do so. But as they began to use force, their political nature also contributed to the polarization of the political

situation in Donbas. To some extent this was a necessary but also intentional move. By escalating the conflict, the volunteers sought to stir Ukrainians to mobilize, as well as to drag the state with its greater resources into the war. From the government's perspective the situation was alarming. Lacking alternative force, the state was dependent on the volunteers who mobilized to defend Ukraine. These volunteers nevertheless did not merely undermine state sovereignty, but also threatened to plunge Ukraine into disorder. The volunteers questioned the legitimacy of Ukraine both domestically and internationally, when Russia was working hard to convince everyone that Ukraine was a failed state ran by a fascist junta. Like any other force that is to be used deliberately and purposefully, the volunteers had to be subjected to control.

CHAPTER 5

Control of Force

Both the volunteer battalions and whatever other forces the state could muster fought for Ukraine. But what did that really mean? Was the state supposed to take the lead, and the volunteers follow? Or was Ukraine rather a national body defined not by territory, but by the will of the Ukrainian nation? If so, who counted as Ukrainian, and did the volunteers represent the nation? To what extent were the aims of the government and the volunteer battalions the same?

This chapter focuses on control of force, or the ways the state subjugated the volunteer battalions. The chapter begins with a discussion of the importance of the control of force for state-building and strategic theory. As previously argued, sovereignty assumes monopoly of force, which states rely on to ensure their subjects submit to their will. From the perspective of strategy, only violence that is purposeful, deliberate, and legitimized counts as force. This necessitates control of force. Without control, belligerents can both under- and overshoot, with the end result that force either lacks utility or even has adverse strategic effects. Control is closely connected to command, yet as investigations of command tend to study state armed forces, they assume control of force (King 2019). Command is thus best seen as part of the control of force. The seeping of politics through all levels of war also means that neither strategy nor strategic effects are exclusively vertical, top-down processes. As contemporary wars typically feature coalitions of states as well as non-state actors, more attention has been devoted to horizontal command.

The second section focuses on the context where anarchy was avoided, and the third on how the Ukrainian state sought to control the volunteer battalions. Considering Ukraine's underdog position in relation to Russian might, the Ukrainian state had to balance its attempts to control the volunteers with surrounding political and military realities. With scarce resources, it was necessary to effectively use whatever means were available. The state had to woo the volunteer battalions but also ensure that it could rely on the volunteers to execute its strategy. The ways the state's enemies and the dynamic nature of the war imposed themselves on the situation further complicated matters.

Acting within the national framework, the Ukrainian state intervened to enforce control over the volunteers through four methods: exhaustion, co-option, incorporation, and, ultimately, coercion. These four methods were used simultaneously. Despite the high threshold for resorting to coercion, it formed the foundation on which the three other strategies were built. The following subsections investigate how the state employed each of these to control the volunteer militias

The final section discusses the end of the volunteers, or what followed after the state succeeded in subjugating the majority of them. By June 2015 the volunteer battalion phenomenon had largely waned. State control over the volunteer battalions and the war was never perfect, nor did its success mean that control was permanent. The dynamics of the war too greatly influenced the volunteers. The Spirit of 2014 was better suited to a war of movement than immobile trench warfare that left little room for heroism and aggressive soldiering. Largely unhappy with the alternatives offered by the state, many volunteers attempted to return from war to peace. This was not always an easy undertaking, with many ending somewhere in between. And even after the volunteers returned, they continued to exert influence over the government and its political ends. The same national cage that helped the state control the volunteers in the first place also limited the government's hand. When the volunteers pulled the right strings, the government had little alternative but to follow.

Control of Force

Control of force forms a central tenet in the Western understanding of sovereignty (Weber 1978). It is equally important for strategy. Emphasizing the importance of control of force for both states and warfare, Howard argues that “military activity ... carries an intrinsic imperative towards control; an imperative derived from the need to maintain order and discipline, to conserve both moral and material forces and ensure that these are always responsive to direction ... without controls and limitations war cannot be conducted at all” (Howard 1979, 3–4).

After force is created, it needs to be controlled before it can be used. Without control, a force resembles a mob which contributes little more than anarchy. Absent control, the utility of force is at best uncertain, strategy virtually impossible. Central for implementing strategy and achieving results in war, control of force is intimately connected to hierarchical chains of command. The purpose of command is to increase military effectiveness through coordination of forces (King 2019, 57–58), as well as manage the confusion and uncertainty inherent in warfare (Ångström and Widén 2015, 64).

The necessity to manage confusion and uncertainty and to increase effectiveness has led to the emergence of two ideal type philosophies based on centralization and decentralization, respectively. Command tactics or *Befehlstaktik* attempt to control chaos through centralization and emphasize top-down planning that keeps subordinates on tight leash. Mission command or *Auftragstaktik* in turn accepts uncertainty and tries to turn it to one’s advantage through decentralization, allowing subordinates more leeway. Ultimately, “military command is reduced to a distribution of uncertainty between the different levels of command within the military hierarchy” (Ångström and Widen 2015, 66; see also Van Creveld 1985).

The period since the 1990s has nevertheless witnessed the emergence of new factors that need to be considered. Aside from technological developments that seemingly allow real-time con-

trol of even individual soldiers, the consolidation of traditional levels of war – strategic, operational, and tactical – constitutes an even greater evolution of strategy, as well as control of force. In other words, the space in which strategy and strategic effects originate has evolved.

As the notion of war as a continuation of politics by other means implies, strategy is often perceived as the top-down responsibility of government cabinets and military headquarters. However, as evidenced in foreign deployments (the main kind of war Western forces have engaged in during the three decades that followed the end of the Cold War), smaller force configurations and weaker central control over force have pushed the responsibility for strategy downward. Unable to achieve greater political aims through the use of force alone, local commanders increasingly bear the responsibility for devising strategy on the ground in what can be called *Auftragsstrategie* (Honig and Käihkö, forthcoming). Yet the penetration of politics has not stopped at any specific level of command but seeped down to the bottommost level of war. As the former commander of US Marine Corps General Charles Krulak described, in more limited conflicts with significant media presence, acts committed by individuals can have strategic and even political consequences (Krulak 1999). Junior ranks, traditionally kept at arm's length from strategy, have found themselves with unprecedented responsibility for strategic success and failure in contemporary wars (Honig and Käihkö 2012; Simpson 2013).

Strategy from below also emphasizes how control of force is necessary not only for achieving positive strategic effects but also for preventing negative ones. During the Cold War, control of force, de-escalation, and conflict management became core considerations of strategy, as no political ends justified nuclear holocaust (Freedman 2003; Kaplan 1991). In this context, even the slightest act could have resulted in catastrophic consequences. In turn, Soviet centralized command implies that any doubts concerning the political reliability of force warranted holding it on a tight leash. Following the Bolshevik revolution, the Soviets created a democratic military. With the rank and file questioning and

debating orders from above, discipline suffered (Overy 1999, 8). Questioning the political reliability of the officer corps, Bolshevik leaders attempted to strengthen control through a massive purge and by pairing political commissars with military commanders. The Winter War against Finland in 1939–40 proved the system cumbersome and inefficient from a strictly military perspective. The Soviets soon ended dual command by military commanders and political commissars and reinstated the previous professional military command structure (Bellamy 2008, 86; Merridale 2005).

Western states have sought to control force through professionalization and by subordinating force to sovereigns. Central to control is the separation of the military from the rest of society. Considering the noun “military” only appeared in English in the early 18th century (Oxford English Dictionary 2002a), the term is of recent historical vintage. This development corresponded with armies beginning to replace their colors with those of kings who reigned over the states the soldiers served. Incorporation of force into a dedicated bureaucracy called the “armed forces” contributed to the distancing of matters of war from the rest of society (Howard 2001).

Based on ideas of nation-states and strict separation of the military from the civilian, the ideal model of Western civil–military relations remains one described by Huntington (1957): national military bureaucrats subordinated to elected civilian politicians and provided maximum autonomy within a narrowly defined apolitical military sphere. To be professional, the military thus had to refrain from doing politics. Devolution of strategy threatens both the democratic view of civil–military norms and this narrow and in-practice unrealized professional image. The autonomous space of military professionals ultimately builds on a temporal and spatial delimitation of war. When it comes to the temporal limitation, the military assumes responsibility for waging war only for its duration, with civilians retaking control as soon as conflict ends (Käihkö 2020c, 18). The spatial limitation in turn refers to the armed forces’ traditional role in external violence. As

politics have permeated war from top to bottom, contemporary wars are rarely declared. But if every act by rivals is then understood to constitute an act of war, the division between internal and external collapses, as do all limits to war. The resulting omnipresent “gray zone” or “hybrid war” does not match the traditional military comfort zone, where it enjoys professional autonomy. As Rupert Smith (2008) has observed, such autonomy is hardly possible in cases where the ends sought are a condition like democracy, rather than a strictly military victory.

Further horizontal complications arise when force does not belong to a single organization. As the twenty-first-century Western wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria illustrate, states typically fight wars as part of a broader coalition in conflicts where non-state actors play important roles. Both kinds of allies have the potential to influence not only strategy but also political ends: Allies – both state and non-state actors – add new ingredients to the mix, including other wills. While the ends sought by various actors may align, they are rarely the same.

One of the main lessons of the First World War was that “no military victories, however spectacular, were likely to be decisive so long as civil society retained the will and the capacity to carry on the war” (Howard 1979, 10). Smaller Western nation-states in particular base their defense planning on this belief. Facing far stronger opponents, they rely on strong participation of the people and national “will to resist.” Seeking the mobilization of all available means – total defense – these countries reinforce their professional standing forces with conscripts, reservists, and paramilitary forces often trained for guerrilla warfare.

Again, the danger herein is that the ends of the people, the government, and its military often differ. In his “wonderful trinity,” Clausewitz famously associated the people with “the original violence of its elements, hatred and animosity, which may be looked upon as blind instinct” (Clausewitz 2004, 19). Even in modern theories, non-state actors continue to be associated with overreaction and escalation (Duyvesteyn 2012). Restraining the perceived escalatory tendencies of the people, combined

with attempts to spare noncombatants from war, has contributed to attempts to professionalize, and thus limit, war. There is often tension between states and nations, and state crises often lead to heightened nationalist feelings. This tension is magnified in war. Linking the viability of their nation and victory in war (Hutchinson 2017), just as Clausewitz envisaged, the people may in some situations be more warlike than their leaders.

States are typically in a better position to control non-state allies, such as militias, than forces belonging to other states. In most situations, states are at least initially stronger than militias and other non-state actors who cohabit the same territory. Whereas states are equal in theory, in cases where two or more states come to share the same territory – wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Viet Nam come to mind – the principle of sovereignty alone gives the so-called host states some advantages over intervening ones.

Sovereignty limits state behavior against other states but also allows a wider repertoire of strategies to be used against non-state actors. As argued in this chapter, such strategies are often necessary. The difficulties in controlling volunteer battalions and the downing of flight MH-17 support Freedman's view that complex command arrangements question the utility of "hybrid" strategies. Complicated command not only limited Russian attempts to control the separatists in eastern Ukraine, but more generally the idea of numerous means requires "a competent and extensive command structure ... to pull together the different strands of activity so that they reinforced rather than contradicted each other" (Freedman 2017, 225–26). Russian reliance on auxiliaries instead of professional forces suggests that its operations in Donbas were improvised. This came at a price for both cohesion and control (Kofman et al. 2017, 57).

Ukrainian separatist leaders came with their own agendas and priorities, which were not necessarily the same as those of their Moscow-based sponsors (Matveeva 2018). Russia sought to control these actors early on (Politie.nl 2019). Complicating factors in these attempts were that the Russian agencies which curated sepa-

ratists have their own ends – and that the competition between security services especially carried into the separatist-controlled areas of Ukraine (O. Carroll 2017). The primary example of how challenges associated with multiple actors, activities, and decentralization of command resulted in overreaction is the downing of MH-17. This constituted a crime that led to significant and long-term negative political consequences for both the separatists and Russia, which only became subjected to severe sanctions after the attack on the passenger plane. Control of force is rarely if ever complete during times of war. Increasing the number of actors involved further complicates the process of control. In Ukraine, this meant that the opportunities for blunders were amplified.

Avoiding Anarchy

The questions posed at the beginning of this chapter were not theoretical as the government that filled the void left by Yanukovich immediately faced a host of challenges. The new government largely stood by as Russia occupied and annexed Crimea. The weakly resisted annexation and Russian support in turn invigorated anti-Maidan protestors in eastern Ukraine. At the same time, some of the Maidan revolutionaries stayed on the streets of the capital, demanding political reforms. Ruling over an increasingly divided country, the government had few means and little money at its disposal. While it officially considered separatism largely an external problem, the volunteer battalions that mobilized in response posed an internal one (Malyarenko and Galbreath 2016). Yet, as Olexa wryly expressed, the volunteer battalions were a problem of the state's own making. If popular mobilization had been allowed through existing state institutions, the battalions never would have emerged.

To make matters worse, these events all took place in an international context where Russian journalists propagated the view that the government in Kyiv equated to a fascist junta that had come to power through an armed coup and now reigned over a failed state. Novorossiia, a political project that directly competed

with Ukraine, was introduced. The volunteer battalions especially were portrayed as criminals and far-right radicals of questionable legal status. The purpose was to discredit the Kyiv government's ability to exert its legal obligations of exercising sovereignty, and not least hamper the Ukrainian response to separatism.

This questioning, not only of sovereignty's predominance but its sheer existence, posed a threat to the state, and the notion of anarchy fundamentally implied that the state was not in control of the situation. Echoing Clausewitz's wary view of people's war as lawful anarchy that posed as great a danger to the enemy as it did to domestic order, Volodymyr, a Right Sector fighter, longingly described the situation in the spring of 2014 as "anarchy" where "everything was possible." Dmitriy, an early volunteer of Azov, called the volunteer battalions "gangs ... totally out of control. Hundreds [of] people with guns do[ing] ANYTHING ... they want[ed]." For Dmitriy this also applied to separatists, with the only difference that volunteer battalions were motivated by a positive ideology. Sergey agreed, describing the overall volunteer situation as "righteous mayhem." For Kazhan, his Aidar embodied this anarchy in a way that clarifies its motto "it was not us." Sviatoslav explained this motto as a funny way to describe a child's reply when they are "making something that is forbidden by [an] adult" – or when Aidar did things forbidden by the government but "supported by the people." From the government's perspective this kind of anarchy was far from child's play as it could lead to state failure and the loss of control over force. This became the government's main fear; anarchy had to be prevented at all costs. In the spring of 2014 the absence of other means meant that it was these volunteers whom the government had to rely on in order to protect itself from destruction.

If the government was spoiled for one thing, it was the number of analogues it could use to discuss the fear of losing sovereignty. The first analogue was the so-called "Somalia scenario" – Russia's framing of Ukraine as a failed state directly or indirectly run by neo-Nazi sympathizers. Kyiv had to counter this framing, not least because its international reputation was at stake. Courting

the necessary foreign assistance for reforms and war alike would become more difficult if Ukraine was not considered a credible actor. Dependent on goodwill from abroad, the government emphasized law and legality when discussing the problems of both volunteer battalions and separatists. Explaining the process of forming special police units for enlisting volunteers, the former deputy head of the Maidan self-defense and the deputy minister of internal affairs Mykola Velychkovych explained that it was crucial

to give an opportunity to those really willing to legally and officially defend Ukraine ... everything had to [be] and was done within the law ... the world was watching us, and we had to prove that Ukraine wasn't Somali[a]. (Quoted in Hladka et al. 2017, 18)

The emphasis on legality indicates the predominance of the state, and hence the government and the political elite that ruled by and through law. Here, comparisons with Somalia possessed a deeper meaning. In June 2014, following his election, President Petro Poroshenko (quoted in Luhn and Walker 2014) claimed that the separatists' goal was "to turn Donbass into a Somalia where they would rule with the power of machine guns. I will never allow that to happen on the territory of Ukraine." The deputy governor of Dnipropetrovsk also expressed his worry about Donbas turning into "a swathe of ungoverned territory harboring bandits who cross into the rest of Ukraine to raid, kidnap and steal" (Economist 2014).

More local analogues of undesirable scenarios came in the form of *atamanschina* and *makhnovshchina*. These referred to times in Ukrainian history when powerful chieftains and warlords held more power than the weak central government, for instance after the Russian civil war that began in 1917. While leaders in Kyiv and the separatist-controlled areas may have agreed on little else, they were all wary of the anarchy Ukraine experienced during the civil war a century earlier (Wilson 2014, 134). Somewhat ironically, considering that he challenged Ukrainian sovereignty but in a manner that illustrates broader notions of the primacy of the

state, Alexander Borodai, the first prime minister of the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR), claimed:

The state tries to control any powerful social movements because the state is apprehensive to anarchy. Because the state is about regulation and control, and armed anarchy is not welcome. If somebody breaks the state monopoly on violence, even for the good of the country, they potentially become a problem and should be brought under control. This is the natural process. (Quoted in Matveeva 2018, 222)

Following this logic, the Ukrainian state needed to protect its sovereignty not only against Borodai and other separatists but also against the volunteers who mobilized to fight them. Anarchy was deemed harmful to both the war effort and Ukrainian state-building. The stakes were high. As Serhiy Pashynsky, the provisional head of the Presidential Administration of Ukraine, stated: “we didn’t want the chaos of 1917–1918 to return. It was clear once this red line was crossed, there will be no way of getting our country, our state, back” (quoted in Hladka et al. 2017, 8). Pashynsky’s statement should not be taken out of context. He was describing Crimea, which was simmering after the flight of Yanukovich. The government was losing control over Ukraine’s territorial sovereignty. It was here that Pashynsky envisaged volunteer battalions countering Russia in Donbas and buying time for the mobilization of the armed forces. He thus saw the volunteer battalions as a means to be used by the government to prevent chaos and disorder.

For Burzhua these analogues were nothing more than an overexaggerated “spooky story to get people to blindly support Poroshenko’s cabinet.” Yet these analogues began to be drawn before Poroshenko came to power. No doubt seeking to normalize the situation and to maintain the emerging power structures, Poroshenko’s predecessor Turchynov noted on April 13 when announcing the start of the ATO:

I'm addressing those who want to defend Ukraine. Now the main thing is not to destabilize the situation in Ukraine, and not to play to the hands of the enemy and its agents, whose aim is not only to prevent elections but also to topple the government and create chaos and instability. (BBC News 2014a)

Here the government clearly adopted a national framework and assumed the mantle of leader of Ukrainian statehood. According to Michael Mann, since the mid-19th century nation-states have constructed national cages that through norms and laws tighten the relationship between the state and society (Mann 1993). In times of war, polarization and demands of patriotic loyalty help to ensnare and push contenders into the cage (Levi 1997). As President Turchynov's speech suggests, one was either with the government or with the separatists. In his speech Turchynov sought to unite Ukrainians against a common external enemy within the normative and legal framework of the Ukrainian nation-state at war. Linked with the creation of force, the national framework allowed Kyiv to employ certain ways to control force, and curtailed others.

At the start of the war, it was not obvious that the state and the government would play a major part in waging it. While the volunteer battalions emerged as a crucial stopgap that bought time for the state to mobilize forces against separatism, it remained uncertain whether the volunteers would deliver strategic gains. Left uncontrolled by the government, they could just as easily have led to even worse political outcomes. These worries were magnified by the volunteer battalions' political nature. Not unlike the military and previous militias like the Freikorps (Waite 1969) and Finnish civil guards (Ahlbäck 2014), even in Ukraine the volunteer battalions influenced not only means and ways, but effectively even political ends. As discussed in [Chapter 4](#), the revolutionary Spirit of 2014 meant that the goals of the government and the volunteer battalions were not necessarily the same. Thus, the government made control of force a top priority. It sought to stay in power through normalizing the volatile situation and guaran-

teeing domestic order not only in Donbas but across Ukraine. The problem was that in the spring of 2014 the state depended on the same volunteer forces it sought to control to fight the uncontrollable separatists.

As representatives of the people and the nation, the volunteers enjoyed far more popular support than the state or its armed forces. On the one hand, this made it difficult for the state to force them to fold. On the other, the state sought to tap into the battalions' popularity and gain legitimacy through association. Some soon recognized the volunteers' military value, which could be more broadly useful in war. Most notably, Avakov sided with the volunteers. His ministry even published a book about the volunteers, in which the minister took credit for organizing and arming the first battalions (Käihkö 2018d). Politicians both inside and outside the government employed the volunteer constituency to bolster their nationalist credentials (Fedorenko and Umland 2022). These kinds of ideological and political considerations must not be ignored when investigating the control of force (Staniland 2015).

The state benefited greatly from the fact that this war was, from the start, fought within a national framework. As mentioned in [Chapter 4](#), the volunteer battalions were pro-Ukrainian and employed symbolism that matched their ideology. Their insignia often featured the trident and flag of Ukraine. The blue and yellow of the Ukrainian flag became a staple, as did the black and red adopted by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army in the early 1940s. In fact, volunteers adopted this ensign as the unofficial battle flag in the war in Donbas. Many battalion names referred to existing national administrative units or geographical features. Some early volunteers wore badges that referred to the Ukrainian armed forces. In some cases, the bearers had military backgrounds; but ultimately this reflected how the volunteers perceived themselves as "patriots" obligated to protect the violated territorial sovereignty of Ukraine when the state was unable to do so. In so doing, the volunteers largely replicated existing state functions.

By tying their fate not only to the volunteer battalions but also to the state and the nation, the new authorities nevertheless risked alienating those who were not on the side of the volunteer “patriots.” This concern magnified as the volunteers increasingly became perceived as agents and instruments of the state, and as the state more willingly investigated misconduct outside the ATO zone than within it. At the same time, the favorable portrayal of the volunteers as “patriots” also made it more difficult for the state to resort to coercion. As the volunteers enjoyed more popular support than the government and state institutions, their relationship was ambiguous and subject to negotiation. Ultimately, the government had to tread carefully with the volunteers. If these patriots were either with the state or against it, would the state conversely be against its people if it went against the volunteers?

Controlling the Volunteer Battalions

Ukrainian volunteers resembled many other volunteer and militia forces. They served a common ideal; their voluntary nature meant they could go home when they wanted; there was little discipline in the restrictive sense of inhibiting individuality; and the resulting warfare was often unsophisticated, if not altogether amateurish (Ahlbäck 2014; Käihkö 2017; Lawrence 1990, 18–19; Waite 1969). As the minister of defense Stepan Poltorak (quoted in Bukkvoll 2019, 12) described this force: “the volunteers are special creatures. They are incredibly well motivated, and for them it is not interesting to subordinate to the strong discipline or regular units. They need more movement.” Not unlike in other revolutionary forces, commanders were often elected, and authority based on personal charisma rather than formal rank. It should not be surprising that it was challenging to control the volunteers and to use them as a means for achieving political ends.

As noted in [Chapter 4](#), in the early days of the conflict, state security forces received few orders from their political and military leaders. The orders given were rarely carried out because the military and other security services either refused or were unable

to follow them. Violating Western civil–military norms, these actors had to choose sides in an uncertain situation or become bystanders. Following the Spirit of 2014, the politicization of the separatists, the notions of Russian spring, and the apathy of the security forces inspired the volunteer battalions to mobilize.

This unplanned rise of the volunteer battalions offered both a relief and a challenge to the state. While the volunteers were helpful militarily, their revolutionary roots and ideological commitments also meant that they were inherently political actors. In the aftermath of the revolution, while taboo in Western military theory, one was either with or against the state now run by politicians who rose to power thanks to the Maidan protestors.

This political nature of the volunteers became a problem when they started exerting demands on the government. Volunteers did not merely request political reforms. Interpreting state inaction as unwillingness to defend Ukrainian sovereignty, volunteer battalion fighters also sought to escalate the conflict in order to draw in the state and its armed forces. As the head of Right Sector Yarosh explained on April 20 after Girkin's group of separatists captured Sloviansk:

While so many people in the country hesitated, and didn't know what to do, we had the honor to show how to defend the country's interests. We could waste our time and demand weapons from the authorities, but we understood that the political issues wouldn't be solved fast ... Many higher officials failed to understand that the war with the Russian Federation was ongoing, and that it started in February 2014, in Crimea, and that we were losing this war hopelessly. In order to win the war somebody had to start shooting the terrorists. We can't win the war by urging the enemy to stop it. (Quoted in Hladka et al. 2017, 108, 110–11)

Yarosh was hardly the only volunteer willing to start shooting. Sergey once witnessed a Ukrainian colonel order an Azov fighter to take a photo of him with tanks in the background. As the Azovite showed no interest in doing the colonel's bidding, he was threatened with consequences for his military career. Such threats did

not work with the volunteer, who snapped “fuck career and fuck you. I’m here to kill.”

Even prior to the election to the Verkhovna Rada of several volunteer commanders in October 2014, the volunteer battalions resorted to political action to ensure escalation, or at least to prevent de-escalation, of the conflict. For instance, in June 2014 Semen Semenchenko organized a rally of several thousand in Kyiv as a unilateral government ceasefire was coming to an end. Calling for harsher measures against separatism, Semenchenko promoted martial law and warned that without government action “the citizens will start acting by themselves to free their land of Donbas from terrorists” (Euromaidan Press 2014b). As late as October the same year, Yuriy Bereza of Dnipro-1 and by then a member of parliament said, “we’re going to give them [the government] half a year to show the country has somehow changed, that even if it’s hard, there’s light ahead” (quoted in Smith 2014). If this did not happen, he stated, there would be a coup.

Considering that many of those fighting in volunteer battalions had already successfully toppled one government and had since acquired arms and combat experience, such threats had to be taken seriously. But although both threats and fears were widespread, the volunteers’ political influence correlated with their relative power vis-à-vis the state. While several volunteers described their greatest success as dragging the state into the war, the rising strength of the state also meant that the volunteers’ political influence soon began to wane. Any attempt at a military takeover never materialized.

The Spirit of 2014 was free and difficult to tame. This had implications for strategy, as the volunteer battalions operated in ways that hardly corresponded with hierarchical and bureaucratic military regulations. Because they entered the war voluntarily, the volunteers felt entitled to autonomy. As long as they remained outside formal state structures, the volunteers were not obligated to follow formal orders. Yet even formal integration did not immediately improve the state’s control of force. As Kazhan diplomatically put it, “Aidar obeyed orders but in its own way.” Less

diplomatically, he believed that the volunteers just wanted to fight separatism: “When war [was] effectively prosecuted ... we didn’t give a fuck about giving or obeying orders.” One Dnipro-1 volunteer provided a similar account, describing that the liberation of the village of Pisky in the Donetsk suburbs was executed without orders from above. Subsequent orders to withdraw were ignored for several months (Malko and Burlakova 2015). As Yarosh (quoted in Chernyshev 2016; see also Bukkvoll 2019) noted, the volunteers “simply reserved the right to disobey illogical orders.” Both Olexa and Sviatoslav emphasized that many orders belonged to this category. For example, Olexa described the assault on Logvinovo, where officers from the armed forces could not read maps and misinterpreted hills for buildings when planning the operation. Sviatoslav in turn recounted how the armed forces did not possess current situational awareness. For instance, his Aidar unit received an order to assault a village which no longer existed.

Classic military theory has viewed the motivation of people in arms as a double-edged sword. Hatred and animosity may be useful for the creation of force but simultaneously pose a risk of rapid escalation, overreaction, and unlimited war that escapes political control. According to Tor Bukkvoll (2019, 8):

None of the independent reports seems to claim that abuses and indiscipline on the part of volunteer battalions were particularly systematic or the result of covert government instructions. In general, these reports do not paint a picture of abuses very much worse than those admitted to by official representatives of the Ukrainian government and official armed forces.

In the war in Donbas, one issue of concern was the treatment of the population by the volunteer battalions. As discussed in [Chapter 6](#), volunteer battalions did overreact. Evidence suggests a bleaker picture than that painted by Bukkvoll.

While volunteers enjoyed high motivation, their immediate horizon was limited to their own units; the battalions consisted of small units operating semi-independently under a broader umbrella. While an asset during the chaotic early days of the war,

limited contact and trust toward other battalions and the state became a vulnerability as the intensity and the scale of the war grew.

Discipline illustrates these problems. Buddha described how his conscript platoon sent those deemed unfit for frontline duty to the rear, but also how volunteers enjoyed more liberties than conscripts and especially contract soldiers. For instance, volunteers could withdraw at any time, both as individuals and as units. According to Vadim, his Azov comrades could opt out of missions if they wanted. Opting out was so common that units rarely operated at full strength. The same was true of at least one Aidar unit, as some of its members were always absent. With people coming and going, Right Sector forces especially (but not exclusively) were often of transient and of an ad hoc nature (Stasyuk 2018, 115).

Because of their volunteer nature, volunteer battalions like Azov upheld a different disciplinary regime than the armed forces and fiercely protected their reputation. As mentioned in [Chapter 4](#), and to some extent questioning Poltorak's view of the volunteers as adverse to strong discipline, no less than 41 percent of volunteers who participated in the largest survey about them pointed to "stricter discipline" as one of the top three reasons for joining a volunteer battalion (Bulakh, Senkiv, and Teperik 2017, 17). For instance, Kazhan recalled a case where two of his squad members wanted to loot an abandoned house, but were stopped after another squad member pulled the pin from a grenade and told them off. Though corporal punishment for minor wrongdoings risked sinking morale, Azov paradoxically allowed harsh punishments to be used against anyone tarnishing the battalion's name. Some of these punishments were meted out with a stick in front of other Azovites. In one incident, ten recruits were caught drinking while in training. Ordered to report the following day, the one-handed recruitment officer told them that whoever wanted to leave could do so. Those who remained would receive 20 lashes. This opportunity to opt out did not exist in the armed forces. A few chose to avoid the punishment and left the battalion. Those who remained were instructed in a fatherly manner to cover

their ears and necks. One recruit failed to do so, which cost him a piece of his ear. Yet when the recruiter was later asked about his men, he praised them, never bringing up the incident. Not only did he consider the matter finished, but the men had proven they belonged to something bigger than themselves. Similar systems of unofficial (and hence strictly speaking illegal) punishments, such as putting wrongdoers into a pit, existed with other battalions, as well as in units of the armed forces. Lacking other means of punishment, and because they could be dug almost anywhere, several units utilized pits as a good place to sober up soldiers, as well as for holding prisoners.

Volunteer battalions resisted taking orders and cooperating with official structures. To some extent this was deemed necessary for self-preservation. Because they perceived the armed forces as incompetent at best and infiltrated at worst, following orders from above came with potential danger. This lack of trust was nevertheless a problem of a vertical rather than horizontal nature. Despite their mistrust of politicians and military command, there were fewer issues on the front lines, where the shared threat united those on the pro-Ukrainian side.

Just like with *Befehlstaktik* and *Auftragstaktik*, control and initiative were often understood as competing in Ukraine. This was, for instance, clear in the lamentation of Bereza, the commander of Dnipro-1. He damned the old centralized Soviet system of command where he felt that permission for everything had to be sought from the company level up to the Verkhovna Rada and the president. This contrasted with the main advantage of the volunteer battalions – their freedom of action and ability to take initiative – even if it went against the law (Perevoznik and Kondratova 2014). This view was widespread among volunteers, who emphasized initiative alongside speed and surprise.

Previous research has proposed ways for controlling non-state means. For Paul Staniland, this can be done in four ways: suppression, containment, collusion, and incorporation. The first two are violent and coercive, the third necessitates active cooperation, and the fourth brings militias into everyday politics. The availability

and use of these ways is ultimately based on the ideologies and relationships between states and militias, both subject to change (Staniland 2015). According to Bukkvoll (2019), the Ukrainian volunteer battalions and the state shared the same strategic ends. As already argued, the state thus struggled to employ the more coercive ways proposed by Staniland, which both include the use of lethal violence. Staniland's four ways, however, offer a more overarching state approach to militias, leaving room for finer analysis of how control is achieved in practice. Such an analysis is especially necessary with forces like Ukrainian volunteer battalions. While the immediate *military* strategic goals of the battalions may have aligned with those of the Kyiv government, this was, strictly speaking, only true after the conflict escalated. More importantly, the *political* goals of the government and the volunteers continued to differ.

Ultimately, not all ways to control means are possible for all states and other actors in all situations; aside from resources, actors are constrained by norms, politics, and other prevailing circumstances. These circumstances include said actors' military capabilities, as well as those of their enemies. External considerations, not least regarding allies and reputation, also play a role. All these factors became evident in Ukraine, where several politicians made the case for arming volunteers for want of alternatives. Yet because the volunteers were lauded as patriots, there were clear limits on the coercive means the state could use against these forces, not all of whom saw the state favorably. At the same time, the volunteers' self-identification as patriots made them vulnerable to the state's demands of loyalty (Levi 1997, 42–43). This gave rise to four ways to establish control over force: exhaustion, co-option, incorporation, and – if the previous failed – coercion (Käihkö 2018a).

Exhaustion basically refers to hindering (the provision of) the factors that constitute a force. For instance, denying ammunition and opportunities to engage with the opponent belong to this category. In comparison, co-option offers a more active way: it involves offering positive sanctions in return for agreeing to fol-

low norms (Sinno 2011, 328). Incorporation in turn seeks to swallow other actors and subject them to a more structured framework of rights and responsibilities. Like co-option, incorporation relies on both positive and negative incentives. While co-option in the case of Ukraine mainly concerned elites and was more limited in scope, incorporation offered a longer-term solution that focused on entire units. Finally, if all else failed, the state could always resort to coercion. Use of force thus remained the ultimate way to control force. These four ways to control force are now investigated in turn.

Exhaustion

Exhaustion refers mainly to material factors of the creation of force, discussed in [Chapter 4](#), and hence logistics. It is not only impossible to wage war without the material means to do so, but logistics also “play an important role in unifying the force, preserving its motivation and strengthening the moral authority of its commanders” (Kress 2016, 3). Legal definitions play a role in controlling force too, as evidenced by the fear of the legal consequences of mobilizing into volunteer battalions. Yet, as argued in [Chapter 4](#), early in the war, volunteer battalions enjoyed better supply than regular troops due to their closer connection with civil society. This significantly complicated state efforts to control the volunteers. Aside from firearms and heavier equipment, volunteers were both better equipped and more motivated to engage separatism than the armed forces.

Arms – the primary factor differentiating combatants from noncombatants – posed a dilemma for the volunteers. Providing anything but civilian weapons to volunteers was tricky and constituted a crime. This almost inevitably drove volunteers closer to the state: the state officially armed volunteers only after they were legalized through incorporation into state structures. Yet early in the war, this by itself meant little, as the state depended on the volunteers and the volunteers armed themselves. Nor did those who

had already mobilized and used firearms care much for the legal consequences of possessing arms.

As long as the volunteers engaged in activities resembling poli-cary rather than military tasks, they had no need for heavy equipment and weapons. As Kyiv and Moscow escalated the conflict by supplying heavier equipment and soldiers to the war, the volunteers increasingly found themselves dependent on the armed forces who possessed this heavier material.

The rigidity of the military bureaucracy itself effectively hindered the state's attempts to consolidate control of force. For instance, units requiring artillery support needed to call the operative command; this could take an hour. Good commanders exchanged phone numbers with artillery officers and called them directly. In the best case, this resulted in immediate indirect fire support. However, there were two problems with these horizontal arrangements. First, the fact that decisions were constantly made between individuals on a local level meant that higher commands had limited and often out-of-date situational awareness, and hence control. As the war conventionalized into static warfare, it became easier to impose bureaucratic processes on all activities. The second problem was that because of the lack of encrypted communication equipment, Russian intelligence could undoubtedly listen in on discussions carried out using unencrypted commercial cell phones.

Virtually all volunteers interviewed were aware Russians were gathering intelligence on them. Because of successful Russian intelligence efforts and infiltration of Ukrainian security services and armed forces, volunteer battalions felt safer keeping a healthy distance from the military command. Several volunteers described their narrow escapes from indirect fire targeting the very place they were ordered to take positions in. For instance, Burzhua's team once received orders from the military to deploy to a specific field. On reaching the area the team opted for a different spot, only to soon witness indirect fire strike the assigned position. While difficult to prove, even Bereza believed that coordination with the armed forces worked on battalion and perhaps

brigade level; involving higher levels led to ambushes and getting shot in the back (Perevoznik and Kondratova 2014).

The distance between those giving and those executing orders can influence the eagerness to allow or resist control. As A. E. Ashworth (1968, 420) has observed, “the military staff were non-combatants located in areas far from conflict ... The staff when making demands involving offensive activity did not thereby implicate themselves in any degree of physical danger.” In Ukraine this distance was increased by the fact that the volunteers, who willingly risked life and limb, did not feel they belonged to the armed forces where the orders originated. Further, volunteers widely believed that there were more generals than pilots in Ukraine, and that many of these generals were, if not Russian citizens, then at least on Russia’s payroll. Many of the officers loyal to Ukraine were also considered incompetent. Whether on Russia’s payroll or simply seeking to curb unwanted competition to the state and its military, military officers were perceived to act malevolently.

Considering these feelings of suspicion and doubt, it is understandable that volunteer battalions resisted coordination and command. These negative perceptions also underscore why casualties in operations involving the armed forces were typically blamed on either incompetence or malevolence. The traumatic defeat at Ilovaisk in August 2014 too was construed in this manner.

The defeat at Ilovaisk profoundly influenced the volunteer battalions. Many volunteers and able commanders were lost. The losses decimated morale but also raised awareness of the necessity to improve the coordination of the pro-Ukrainian combined forces. The Ukrainian deputy minister of defense Ivan Rusnak (quoted in Puglisi 2015a, 8–9) pointed out that the major reasons for the catastrophe were “the independence of volunteer battalions and the lack of exact coordination with the military.” Through Ilovaisk, the conflict had been a free-for-all. Things would never be the same for volunteer battalions again.

The armed forces became dominant after Ilovaisk, not least because the intensity of the war increased. Most volunteer battalions lacked anti-tank weapons, tanks, and artillery, and increas-

ingly became dependent on the state and its military for heavier firepower. While provision of heavy weapons to battalions can be interpreted as the opposite of the strategy of exhaustion, heavy weaponry simultaneously made these units more dependent on the logistical capacity possessed solely by the armed forces. Although a unique case, the Azov Battalion also offers the best example of the evolution of the volunteer battalions – from revolutionaries with do-it-yourself armor to disciplined military formations that actively strove toward NATO standards (Ponomarenko 2017a).

At the same time, most volunteer battalions lacked heavy weapons. Outgunned by their opponents, they struggled to initiate new offensive operations. For instance, several Azov volunteers described how the armed forces were prohibited from providing Azov with artillery coverage in Shyrokyne in early 2015. The tank support Azov received was given on an individual basis by tank crews rather than because of orders from above.

Co-option

Co-option concerns cooperation in exchange for control (Sinno 2011). Co-option can, however, be risky, as the actor one seeks to control gains influence in the process. Depending on the power relationship between actors, co-option attempts can backfire. As co-option typically requires concessions, the one seeking to control can become controlled. European populists, who have hardly been tamed by cooperation with established political parties, offer a good example. In fact, the agendas of the established parties have often shifted toward those held by the populists.

In Ukraine, co-opting concerned in particular the way individuals associated with the volunteer battalions became part of the political establishment. Most political parties sought to include former or active combatants in their electoral lists for the parliamentary elections in October 2014 and the local elections the year after (see also Fedorenko and Umland 2022, 239). As a result, the former elections saw 16 commanders enter the Ukrainian parliament (Stasyuk 2018, 138). After acquiring a stake

in everyday politics, many of them limited their criticism of the political establishment. This in turn reduced the risk of political interventions by the armed formations they were in contact with. The transition of some commanders from armed confrontations to political battles also reduced their influence on military affairs. As anyone who has ever held a command position knows, it is difficult to balance being a comrade with being a commander, even without trying to simultaneously be a politician at the national level. Several volunteer battalion commanders-turned-politicians were subsequently accused of corruption behind the front lines, testing their popularity.

To give just two examples, Semen Semenchenko faced accusations of being more interested in media attention than front-line fighting. Ultimately, some of the Donbas fighters felt like they were “simply cannon fodder for the commander,” whose leadership style favored loyalty above merit. Once Semenchenko declared his candidacy for the October parliamentary elections, his commanders discredited him online, accusing him of embezzlement of volunteer donations, looting, stealing cars, failing to uphold discipline in his battalion, overall poor command, and – the gravest of all sins – abandoning his soldiers in Ilovaisk. On January 10, 2015, Avakov demanded that Semenchenko choose between his posts as the battalion commander of Donbas and his new position as a member of parliament. On the same day, the majority of the unit voiced their distrust toward the leadership, which in turn accused them of looting and violating discipline (Sibirtsev 2015). On February 19, Semenchenko left his command at the helm of the battalion, citing the difficulties of combining it with his parliamentary role. A few days later his former deputy, now the commander of the battalion, elaborated on past failures of leadership, especially “the lack of unity of command and unprofessional orders [and] command of the battalion.” The battalion fighters became “‘cannon fodder’, perishing as a result of lack of coordination, or personal ambitions [and] political agreements [of the] command.” While Semenchenko had in May 2014 brought the battalion under the MoIA’s National Guard, only 90 of

the 800 members of the battalion were willing to continue under this arrangement. Instead, expressing “a desire not to be victims of political games and ambitions of others, and to faithfully serve the motherland,” the battalion was reconstituted as the 46th battalion “Donbas-Ukraine” of the Ukrainian armed forces – a move that was expected to provide the battalion with heavy weapons, coordination, and training (Battalion “Donbas-Ukraina” 2015; Kozak 2015). Donbas-Ukraine effectively continued the legacy of the Donbas Battalion and continued to use its insignia, sporting a hunting saker falcon in the shape of the trident on the flag of the Donetsk oblast. While its members continued to serve in the ATO and occasionally spoke out against Semenchenko’s past command, Semenchenko himself too relied on his wartime past; some of his supporters who may have lacked an association with Donbas-Ukraine have used the Donbas Battalion insignia (Ponomarenko 2017b).

In other cases, the journey from the front lines to politics was less straightforward, as illustrated by the case of Dmytro Yarosh, head of Right Sector. After receiving 0.7 percent of the votes during the first round of the presidential election in May 2014, he was elected to parliament in October. Despite his new position, he continued fighting in the east until wounded in action in January 2015. Three months later, he was nominated as an adviser to the Ukrainian armed forces’ commander in chief, to improve the unity between the volunteers and the state (Ministry of Defence of Ukraine 2015). He has since defended the government on numerous occasions. This inevitably put him on a crash course with more radical nationalists, in whose eyes Yarosh lost his legitimacy as a revolutionary. In November 2015 Yarosh stepped down from the leadership of a party that by then had become marginal in Ukraine (Fedorenko and Umland 2022, 240–41).

A similar marginalization was not uncommon for volunteer battalion commanders, as their subordinates prioritized fighting over politics. Ultimately, it may be wise to see the political rise of some volunteer battalion commanders as connected to military performance during a time of insecurity (Umland 2019, 122).

With volunteers largely subjugated and incorporated into state structures and with the indifference of much of the electorate toward the war, past performance failed to keep these commanders afloat politically. The July 2019 elections that followed the inauguration of Zelensky as president constituted a great shuffle where especially those associated with volunteer battalions lost. The electoral lists of Zelensky's Servant of the People party that won a one-party majority included only one former volunteer fighter. The united list of radical nationalists that included many ATO combatants failed to pass the 5 percent threshold, scoring no more than 2.15 percent of the proportional vote. This suggests that if there was a window of opportunity for gaining political influence through association with the war, by 2019 this window had almost closed (Fedorenko and Umland 2022, 253). Zelensky's electoral support suggested that, after five years of war, Ukrainians wanted peace.

Incorporation

Incorporation of force into state structures offers the standard modern solution for the control of force in the West. In Ukraine this was achieved by integrating the volunteer battalions into the existing structures of the MoD and the MoIA. As discussed in [Chapter 4](#), early on the state may not have had much of a choice in the matter, but neither did integration initially result in much control over the battalions. Artem, an Azov volunteer who joined the battalion in its early days, described the state's integration proposal in the spring of 2014 as "smart." The state emphasized the benefits of integration. And while not all the benefits promised were ultimately delivered, the state also made it clear that if carrots failed, sticks would be resorted to (see Furmanyuk 2015). This explains why battalions like Azov that initially resisted taking an oath and joining the state security forces came around as the political and security situation deteriorated in April (Colborne 2022, 33).

Incorporation of volunteers into state structures meant that the battalions gradually ceased to function independently. More

immediately, incorporation came with salary and legal status, which shielded them from prosecution (Chinchilla and Driscoll 2021). While this status remained ambiguous in an ambiguous war, from the perspective of most volunteers even an ambiguous status was better than none. The status reduced uncertainty concerning the legality of volunteering, which had stopped some like Sasha from mobilizing in the first place. The battalions now became subject to both greater rights and obligations. Commanders exercised more restraint, but incorporation also gave them new rights. For instance, Dnipro-1 had previously, in vain, sought to work with police officers at checkpoints, as the volunteers had no authority to inspect vehicles (Hladka et al. 2017, 89). Incorporation provided them with this right. As Sergey explained, volunteers of the units designated as special police battalions were law enforcement officers by trade. This gave them more room to maneuver, as they were legally entitled to make arrests. In the absence of a declaration of war, however, the volunteers nevertheless often remained in a legal gray area. Despite integration, they were still using violence against their fellow citizens without the legal authority to do so.

As its capacity grew, the state began to assert its power through practical steps. In August 2014, the government deployed the Kyiv-1 Battalion to remove their former comrades who remained at the Maidan in the capital. This action was controversial, as volunteers were compared to the despised Berkut riot police who had fought the protestors during the revolution. Some argued that true patriots – both the members of Kyiv-1 and the remaining protestors at the Maidan – belonged on the front lines, not in the capital (Góralaska 2015). Incorporation also allowed the state to begin mixing volunteers with regular forces. Replacing volunteer commanders with professional military officers countered politicization and improved control. As Artem described the outcome, the integration diminished “individual thinking,” or the notion of “us and all the rest” prevalent in volunteer battalions. While this kind of thinking may well have been necessary for initiative and was therefore perceived as being useful during the initial stages of

the conflict, General Khomchak saw that it inhibited coordination and cooperation (Hladka et al. 2017, 91). With incorporation, anarchy reigned no more.

Incorporation indeed improved control. Bereza, the commander of the Dnipro-1 police special force battalion opposed deploying his unit into Ilovaisk because of the risk it posed. He stated that he would refuse to go unless ordered directly by the MoD. “And I received that order. I couldn’t fail to fulfil it” (quoted in Hladka et al. 2017, 153). The Azov and Shakhtarsk battalions – both of which were under the MoIA – did not join the battle despite orders from the military (Media Initiative Group for Human Rights 2017).

As noted, Ilovaisk illustrated how control of volunteer battalions remained partial. General Khomchak had the overall command of the operation, but could only give direct commands to army and National Guard units. Volunteer battalions were in turn under Vyacheslav “Filin” Vlasenko of the Donbas Battalion, with whom Khomchak had to coordinate. Ultimately, “the regime of tactical coordination demanded a level of personal connections and deal-making that would have been totally unnecessary within a regime of full subordination” (Bukkvoll 2019, 297). This appears to have been the case both between volunteer battalions and the military, as well as between volunteer battalions.

Volunteer battalions were absorbed into the National Guard and the armed forces in earnest after the defeat at Ilovaisk. This process was only hastened by the move to a more static style of trench warfare following the second defeat at Debaltseve in mid-February 2015. Immediately after the first ceasefire that followed Ilovaisk, some volunteer battalion commanders sought to retain their autonomy by establishing their own general staff in the city of Dnipropetrovsk. The staff planned to vet proposals from the armed forces general staff; if agreeable, the volunteer staff would delegate forces to the general staff for the duration of an operation. This proposal came to naught because other volunteer commanders saw parallel chains of command as disruptive (Bukkvoll 2019). The fate of the proposal illustrated that volunteers were not

a uniform group. Some battalions resisted subordination, especially to the armed forces, more than others. The proposal for the establishment of the volunteer staff can also be understood as a form of political pressure. The volunteers sought the dismissal of the general staff chief Viktor Muzhenko, who enjoyed little confidence among the volunteers after the military defeats, but also to ensure that no quarter would be given to the separatists in future negotiations (Interfax-Ukraine 2015c). Again, the volunteers – means – were trying to influence not only other ways and means but effectively also political ends.

While the integration was successful in many ways, it also created new problems for the volunteers. The two issues already discussed concern impediments to the volunteers' freedom of action as well as the lack of trust toward the military chain of command. With little trust, commands were not always followed as intended.

Integration also posed problems far above the tactical level. The MoD and MoIA offered different trajectories to the battalions. The MoIA had initially been faster to reach out to the volunteer battalions than the more bureaucratic MoD (Hladka et al. 2017, 4, 68, 165–66). According to unverified rumors, Avakov also sought to incorporate under his MoIA battalions linked to rival oligarchs to reduce their power. The volunteer battalions under the MoIA became either reserve battalions of the National Guard or special police battalions formally under the authority of the regional police commanders. Some volunteers found it difficult, if not impossible, to become police, which were discredited at the Maidan. Some volunteers outright loathed law enforcement (Umland 2019, 118), with officers, as already mentioned, often referred to as "trash." In comparison, the MoD offered a more centralized structure through territorial defense battalions under regional military enlistment offices. For most independent-minded battalions, the decentralized police battalions were often a more attractive option early in the war. Yet, especially after the war escalated, the MoD provided greater opportunities for combat, as the MoIA units were withdrawn from the front lines. There

were clear pros and cons with both ministries, some of which changed over time.

The battalions had some leeway in negotiating which of the ministries they would integrate into. This is, for instance, illustrated by Donbas-Ukraine, discussed above. While Donbas-Ukraine framed the choice in material terms, the choice was reportedly often a political one. The choice of incorporating into the MoD and the MoIA also had immediate political effects. The MoD was closer to President Poroshenko, who appointed the minister of defense. The minister of internal affairs, Avakov, in turn, was to some extent competing with Poroshenko (Puglisi 2015a, 6), and was himself chosen by the prime minister. The relationship between these ministries thus ultimately reflected the rivalry between the president and the prime minister (Puglisi 2015a, 6), to which volunteers may have added tension (Facon 2017, 24–25). The volunteers thus potentially became instruments of power struggles within the government. This again emphasizes the importance of politics when analyzing force.

Coercion

The war's ambiguity allowed the state the freedom to both encourage volunteer battalions and to punish them if necessary (Mal-yarenko and Galbreath 2016, 123). After the very first days of the conflict, coercion remained an option that influenced the success of the other three ways to exert control over force. Early attempts to pass laws against armed groups were ignored by both the volunteers and separatists.

As the state's strength gradually grew, so did the credibility of its coercive potential. Yet coercion was clearly not the preferred method, nor was it necessarily the most potent one. As Siniša Malešević (2010) notes, violence remains the instrument of the weak, not the strong. For the truly weak, violence is not even an available option. The Kyiv government had to be careful not to turn the volunteer battalions into popular enemies. And while the government made several attempts to dictate the conduct of the

volunteer battalions, its exhortations were not always followed. Coercion also serves as the best example of how the ways to control force available to the government and the separatists differed.

On the separatist side, consolidation of command was the task of Igor Girkin, who narrated the events in a December 2017 interview for Moscow-based publication *Insider*. Focusing on Donetsk, he claimed that his attempts “did not work out because there were units that categorically did not want to obey and had their own financial and supply channels.” The Vostok Battalion “not only categorically refused to obey, but also to cooperate at all ... they categorically refused any contact.” The Oplot Battalion coordinated, but since its leader, Aleksandr Zakharchenko, considered himself the commander of internal troops, he ignored Girkin’s orders; Zakharchenko would not subordinate himself to the minister of defense. Overall, the self-proclaimed DPR was connected to Putin’s adviser Vladislav Surkov. In comparison, the Luhansk People’s Republic (LPR) was considered less centralized and associated with the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB), the successor of the KGB. Yet another group, located in Krasnodon in LPR territory, was led by “retired” Russian officers closer to the Russian minister of defense. Girkin lamented how these officers were qualified to manage a “trained and well-organized regular army,” but “on the territory of the Donetsk and Lugansk republics there were no regular units. These were in fact partisan and semi-partisan formations” formed ad hoc. Girkin himself was pushed out after the downing of MH-17 and did not spare his contempt for the new separatist leadership (*Insider* 2017), or what he considered insufficient Russian support.

Like Girkin, even some previous investigations on the separatists have downplayed the Russian role in the conflict. Separatists began to consolidate forces as soon as the military situation allowed, in spring 2015. According to Matsuzato (2017), this was a demand from Moscow. In order to receive support, the separatists needed to obey. In practice, the separatists replaced several commanders who were willing to go and resorted to assassination to eliminate unwanted competition: several commanders who were

perceived as too independent were killed (Matveeva 2018, 175–78). These measures contributed to the neutralization of competing interests as well as consolidation of forces. By August 2015 most of the Don Cossacks who had controlled swathes of territory in Luhansk were wiped out (Kramer 2015). Evidence released by the Joint Investigation Team on the downing of MH-17 has since suggested much earlier and more extensive Russian meddling (Politie.nl 2019). Russia nevertheless struggled to achieve control while maintaining a veneer of deniability, however implausible: it did not take direct control of the various separatist factions but acted indirectly through intermediaries. Those who did not submit or leave were eliminated. The last high-profile assassination was that of the DPR prime minister Zakharchenko in August 2018.

In comparison with their adversaries on the pro-Ukrainian side, the separatists' political projects had to rely on less established ideological justification. As argued by Marlene Laruelle (2016), the early idea of Novorossiya was built on competing and, to some extent, contradictory paradigms: Soviet red, Orthodox white, and fascist brown. The existence of a national framework can thus hardly be taken for granted. Yet, while the Kyiv government could rely on one, this framework also made it difficult to use coercion in the way the separatists did. Simultaneously, the national cage may have made extensive coercion unnecessary. Lacking similar ideological means on a wider scale, the separatists reportedly resorted to contract forces (Malyarenko and Galbreath 2016), mercenaries of the Wagner company and, ultimately, Russian regulars.

The national framework bound the hands of the Ukrainian government, especially since the volunteers enjoyed much more legitimacy among the people. Because of both its democratic and nationalist credentials and its dependence on the volunteer battalions, the state could ill afford to brazenly oppose these perceived patriots. This said, when the separatists began killing those who did not toe the line during the spring of 2015, the government in Kyiv ordered all non-integrated armed groups to leave the front

lines. This coincided with the dismissal of Kolomoisky – who, as discussed, was an important early patron of several volunteer battalions and a backer of the future president Zelensky – from his position as the governor of Dnipropetrovsk by President Poroshenko. In late March 2015, armed men loyal to Kolomoisky entered the Kyiv offices of the state-owned oil transportation company UkrTransNafta after its director – an ally of Kolomoisky – was suddenly replaced. Many interpreted Poroshenko's subsequent statement regarding the government's decision to curb governors from maintaining their private "pocket armies" as a reference to Kolomoisky (Balmforth 2015). Kolomoisky had publicly and vocally supported volunteer battalions, but the de-escalation of the war that followed the second Minsk agreement allowed the government to emphasize consolidating the control of force in the territory it controlled. Bloodless limitation of the control of force held by oligarchs and other regional strongmen was an integral part of this process.

Several volunteer units, including the Shakhtarsk special police battalion and Tornado special police company, were disbanded after accusations of criminal conduct. A third well-known case was Aidar, a territorial defense battalion under the MoD. In September 2014 Amnesty International accused Aidar of war crimes "including abduction, theft and murder" and acting "with virtually no oversight or control." Amnesty also reported that by then, the MoD had sent two commissions to inspect Aidar, which recommended "its re-organisation and the regularisation of procedures" (Amnesty International 2014). At the end of January 2015 the Aidar commander and member of parliament Serhiy Melnychuk reported that the MoD had disbanded the battalion. The MoD denied this, noting Aidar was subject to re-registering, renaming (including replacing its seal), and reinforcing (Interfax-Ukraine 2015a). This led to immediate protests by Aidar members. They blocked access to the MoD, first taping photographs of their dead comrades to the gates, and later piling car tires at the entrance before setting them on fire. These protests appeared to stop the disbandment as well as the renaming. The MoD con-

tinued to insist that Aidar would merely be reinforced with both personnel and matériel (Interfax-Ukraine 2015b). In April 2015 Hennadiy Moskal, the governor of Luhansk oblast, contacted the MoD and accused Aidar of capturing a bread factory. In June, Moskal posted a list of 65 crimes committed by Aidar in Luhansk in 2014 on his official website. A day later the Verkhovna Rada stripped Melnychuk of his parliamentary immunity. This demonstrated that battalion commanders were not impervious to the state's reach. Yet the Rada had not approved Melnychuk's arrest. And while it approved of inquiries into Aidar's actions in the Kyiv and Zhitomorsk regions, it ruled out investigation of any possible crimes in Luhansk (Quinn 2015a). A month later, Moskal was transferred to Zakarpattia oblast – the opposite side of Ukraine – where he became the governor.

Tornado was a police company operating under the MoIA in the city of Pryvillya in Luhansk oblast. In June 2015, following another complaint by Moskal, its commander Ruslan Onyshchenko and 11 other members were charged with a number of crimes, including captivity, torture, murder, and rape. The unit itself was disbanded. In July 2016 lawmakers and volunteer battalion members pressured a court in Kyiv to release two Aidar fighters accused of several cases of armed robbery, looting, and kidnapping committed in 2015 (Melkozerova 2016). Some observers interpreted the government's overall treatment of the Aidar case as a complete failure. This made the prosecution of the Tornado fighters a litmus test of the government's ability and will to hold volunteers accountable for transgressions (Miller 2016, see also Media Initiative Group for Human Rights 2017).

The Tornado case brought to the fore several issues that were largely ignored during active hostilities, but which became apparent after the ceasefire agreement and the end of major combat. From the perspective of the state, the case centered around lack of oversight over volunteers, which allowed criminal behavior. The inadequate oversight had to be addressed. Members of Tornado instead accused their immediate superior, the Luhansk oblast chief of police, of collaborating with separatists and running a

joint smuggling business with them. Government critics and many other volunteers saw the case ultimately as Poroshenko's attempt to suppress the volunteers once and for all (Sukhov and Rychkov 2015). In April 2017, 8 of the 12 accused were sentenced to long prison terms and the remaining 4 to probation (Interfax-Ukraine 2017b). If nothing else, this proved that, if need be, the government could take action against the volunteers, who were no longer above scrutiny.

The outcome of the Tornado case may, however, have been influenced by other events. Problems with volunteers appear to have followed governor Moskal. In July 2015 Zakarpattia became the scene of an armed confrontation between Right Sector and local law enforcement officers. Presumably contesting control of smuggling routes to the European Union, the confrontation resulted in several fatalities, with several more injured. Far from the front lines, the shootout was deemed serious enough to be discussed in the government's Military Cabinet of the National Security Council (RFE/RL's Ukrainian Service 2015). This again brought pressure to control armed groups, including the volunteer battalions (Zabyelina 2019). Several demobilized volunteer veterans have also been accused of contract killings and other criminal acts over the years.

Two killings appear to have resonated more than any other coercive action taken against volunteers. The first is that in March 2014 of Oleksandr Muzychko, a convicted member of Right Sector who had fought in the First Chechen War and whose death was explained either by suicide after a police chase or execution by security forces. Muzychko's death immediately caused Right Sector to distance itself from plans for political cooperation with, let alone integration into, the security forces (Gomza and Zajackowski 2019, 782). The second killing occurred in December 2015 when Oleh Muzhchyl – a Buddhist radical nationalist who had fought with Right Sector against separatists before turning against Yarosh – was killed by an SBU counterterrorism unit. Better known as Lesnik, Muzhchyl began to advocate war against government officials, whom he saw as Russian collaborators. The

bombing in Kharkiv of a Roshen store – Poroshenko’s confectionary – was attributed to him. While Lesnik called Poroshenko a henchman and spy of Putin, the SBU in turn portrayed Lesnik as a Russian agent (Quinn 2015b). While many volunteers perceived Lesnik to be a radical fool, they nevertheless concluded from the killings that the government was prepared to use force to curb volunteers who went too far. In fact, Poroshenko threatened to designate volunteers who resisted state control as terrorists, in effect equating volunteers and separatists as illegal military formations and enemies of the nation. Such comments further affected Right Sector deliberations over incorporation into state structures (Gomza and Zajaczkowski 2019, 782). And while impossible to verify, it was a common belief among fighters that the SBU had penetrated volunteer battalions in 2014 because of the potential threat they posed to state security. Several of those interviewed believed that the SBU continued to monitor their activities, even though they had returned from the front lines several years earlier.

The End of the Volunteer Battalions?

By June 2015 almost all volunteer battalions had been formally subordinated to state authorities. The Minsk agreements following the defeats, first at Ilovaik and then Debaltseve, were no doubt the main cause. Ilovaik illustrated how the war had changed, now requiring both mass and better coordination of force. The cease-fire agreements made restraint and de-escalation paramount, although fighting continued in Debaltseve for a few days after the signing of the second Minsk agreement. As the agreements also limited the caliber of weapons that could be used on the front lines, the intensity of the war decreased dramatically, too. Violating the agreements could lead to escalation and renewed conflict, as well as international condemnation. Restraint contributed to the conventionalization of the war, which as noted now transformed into more static trench warfare.

The war’s conventionalization allowed the armed forces to strengthen their control of force. The tenth point of the Minsk

agreements also envisaged the withdrawal of all foreign-armed formations, weapons, and mercenaries from Ukrainian territory and the disarmament of all illegal groups. This last point could be interpreted to necessitate subjecting volunteer battalions to state authority. Already, the state had gradually achieved control over the volunteers through the four ways of exhaustion, co-option, incorporation, and coercion. Aside from Right Sector, the battalions were now either disbanded or incorporated into the bureaucratic and legal framework of the state.

Incorporating the volunteers into well-defined social categories under state control proved painful, not least because of alienation. Violence in war is meaningful as long as it is officially sanctioned by the state, enjoys societal support, and is directed at an object – a hated enemy (Ashworth 1968; Leed 1979, 105). None of these three requirements were fulfilled for volunteers in Ukraine after 2015. State consent for the volunteer battalions had always been in doubt. As one report puts it, once integrated into state structures that experienced “minimal conceptual adaptations” (Bulakh et al. 2017, p. 28), volunteers had to accept doctrine that differed from the reality they experienced on the front lines. Even if the war forced the Ukrainian armed forces to adapt, they still retained many Soviet-era procedures. When the intensity of the war decreased following the ceasefire agreements, old Soviet-era officers and practices returned. The situation only worsened when the battalions incorporated into the MoIA were withdrawn, leaving the more hierarchical MoD-linked battalions on the front lines. Increasingly, volunteers found themselves engaged with seemingly pointless formal bureaucracy. To make matters worse, the volunteers were getting drawn into a state that was not fundamentally different from the one they toppled at the Maidan. Not only did the volunteers increasingly question whether the revolution had succeeded, they also felt pushed and pulled into joining a system many of them fundamentally opposed.

Some felt the subjugation of the volunteers equated to nothing less than a failure to reform power structures (Furmanyuk 2015). This feeling of failure encompassed the lack of reform not only

of the state but also wider Ukrainian society. Inherent in the ideals of the Spirit of 2014 had been changing the cold and distant *Gesellschaft* into a warm and personal *Gemeinschaft*. Though most considered the war necessary because of the imminent threat to Ukrainian sovereignty, some perceived it as a historical opportunity for further societal unification. By 2015 waning civilian support and the many examples of draft dodging had made it clear that the war in Donbas had not resulted in full mobilization of the people. Ever-louder civilian voices spoke of how tired they were of war. This, and the invisibility of war on much of the home front, contributed to an existential crisis for volunteers. Not only did the war appear to be *Sitzkrieg*, or phony war, but those engaged with the war increasingly experienced living in a “parallel reality.” The volunteers could only rely on portions of society to support them.

The final factor behind alienation was the way the volunteers increasingly struggled to recognize the conflict as war as it conventionalized and stabilized. Not unlike the First World War, what started as a war of movement froze as the parties dug in. Soon combatants experienced a conflict between their expectations and the reality of the war, as romantic notions of individual heroism were crushed by the machinelike labor of war (Ellis 1987; Lederer 2006; Leed 1979). In the First World War, a strategy of attrition led to the adoption of offense as the norm. Military elites nevertheless recognized that what they called “offensive spirit” was not innate. Constant hostility and aggression toward the enemy had to be “molded” through training and face-to-face interaction. Regardless, in many sectors of the front, the relationship between the warring parties was not characterized by enmity but by the informal mutual principle of “live and let live” (Ashworth 1968, 409–11). Perhaps even more so than volunteers in the First World War, those in Ukraine a century later subscribed to this norm of aggressive soldiering. But as the wars formalized, prolonged trench warfare became more laborious than glamorous. As warfare turned into seemingly endless labor, where limiting escalation became a central consideration, room for heroism and offensiveness diminished. As a case in point, the Azov Regiment was

withdrawn from the front lines in August 2015, only returning in February 2019. Diminished opportunities to fight contributed to alienation. If and when war was winnable only through violence, then limiting violence was perceived only to perpetuate it. Any individual effort risked becoming meaningless (Leed 1979).

Several Ukrainian volunteers summarized their feelings of alienation by highlighting the absence of strategy. They felt it was pointless to risk life and limb without a way or even a vision of how the war would be won. Unable to live up to their expectations of aggressive soldiering, they felt they were wasting their time. With less fighting, some volunteers – the most famous case being the Tornado company discussed above – became involved with criminal activities. This questioned notions of the volunteer movement as a patriotic upsurge and embodiment of the Spirit of 2014.

Aside from individual alienation, incorporation also contributed to fragmentation of the battalions. Some suspected that the authorities deliberately intended to sow confusion within them. According to Kazhan, this was the case in Aidar, where the army headquarters immediately sought to appoint a new commander. In addition to the old commander Serhiy Melnychuk, Aidar received a commander nominated by the MoD, as well as a new, self-proclaimed one. As Melnychuk – elected to parliament in October 2014 – noted when defending Aidar against the accusations of human rights violations, “the Aidar battalion was a decentralized unit composed of numerous sub-divisions” with significant distance between them; and that one of these sub-divisions was guilty of criminal conduct. In any case, Russia used this to “discredit” the whole battalion, as did the Ukrainian government, ostensibly “because the Aidar battalion was a political competitor to Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko’s government” (Serhiy Melnychuk, quoted in Ramani 2017).

Similar fracturing was also experienced in other battalions. For the Donbas Battalion this happened after Ilovaïsk, as “Filin” left to form his Battalion Donbas-Ukraine. Another splinter, Battalion Donbas Bezpeka (Security) emerged later. In May 2015 the

Carpathian Sich battalion in turn agreed to “legalize” itself by joining the 93rd Separate Mechanized Brigade of the Ukrainian army as a separate unit. In April 2016 this unit was disbanded, its members either continuing service as regular soldiers or resigning (Fedorenko and Umland 2022, 242). While Azov clearly benefited from cooperating with Avakov until his sudden resignation in July 2021, Right Sector chose a path of confrontation. Whereas this decision ultimately contributed to the fragmentation and declining influence of Right Sector (Colborne 2022, 78, 85–86), some still felt that the only unintegrated battalion provided the opportunity to continue waging war in a proper manner. As a result, some volunteers joined Right Sector after their units were incorporated into state structures. Having put their lives on hold to join the war effort but no longer experiencing an immediate need to stay, many volunteers now returned to their families, jobs, and studies, or whatever awaited them back home. For Right Sector, however, their volunteer status continued to be both a source of pride and a constant problem. While lack of pay allowed them to present themselves as the only true patriots among others who fought for money, it was also impossible to continue fighting without support. This dilemma contributed to their dwindling numbers. Some stayed on the front lines until they ran out of money, then left to work to save up in order to return for a while. Another hurdle that limited operations was the increasing difficulty of transporting arms and ammunition as Ukrainian security services tightened their control close to the front line.

Right Sector was always a loose alliance, and parts of it were even incorporated into the armed forces. In the summer of 2016, 130 Right Sector fighters joined the 54th Mechanized Brigade as contract soldiers after being promised they would do so as a company and thus continue serving together. Used to following orders of those they respected, they found it difficult to adjust to formal military discipline. Within a year, they were split into six different frontline units, prompting the fighters to go on hunger strike. About 40 joined Battalion Donbas-Ukraine, believing it had continued to adhere to volunteer customs. Yarosh’s loss of legitimacy

discussed above contributed to the split of Right Sector into two parts: Yarosh's UDA (Ukrainian Volunteer Army) and Andriy Stenpytskiy's DUK (Volunteer Ukrainian Corps) (Ponomarenko 2017c). Whereas DUK was perceived to have political ambitions, UDA focused on frontline activities to protect Ukrainian sovereignty. Following this split, Yarosh largely disappeared from public view.

Right Sector offers an example of how state control of force was never perfect, and how the relations between Poroshenko and the volunteer movement gradually soured (Fedorenko and Umland 2022, 250). In January 2017 a few dozen nationalists and veterans enacted a rail blockade of separatist-controlled areas, gradually stopping the flow of all goods, especially coal. They sought to end what they described as "trade in blood" that the separatists used to finance the war. Semenchenko and the loyal remains of his Donbas Battalion soon emerged as the most visible supporters of the blockade. According to Semenchenko (quoted in Miller 2017b), "When the head of the government forbids, by law, any trade transactions with the enemy, when all [Ukrainian] prisoners are released, and when the occupied territories are, by law, named as 'occupied' – only then will the blockade be lifted."

Poroshenko initially declared the blockade illegal due to economic costs, and because it would "destroy Ukraine in Donbas." The popularity of the blockade and the blockaders' nationalist credentials nevertheless made it difficult for him to resort to force in order to lift it. The paralysis ended when separatists countered by announcing the takeover of 43 industrial enterprises. In response, Poroshenko adopted the blockade as official policy. Aside from financial costs, and as Poroshenko had cautioned, the blockade led to further separation of separatist-controlled areas from the rest of Ukraine (Milakovsky 2018). Poroshenko's successor, Zelensky, faced similar pressure. Elected in part because of his promises to bring peace, he too was to an extent a "hostage of the ultranationalists" who saw any concessions as capitulation and threatened a second Maidan Revolution (a presidential adviser, quoted in Matthews 2022, 148).

The two cases offer a remarkable example of how the Ukrainian governments too were caged by the nationalist framework. Despite resistance, a small group of volunteers successfully forced the government to adopt policies that amounted to a significant escalation of the conflict in the first case, and at the very least made de-escalation impossible in the second. As will be discussed in the next chapter on the use of force, this was not the first time the volunteer battalions did so.

CHAPTER 6

Use of Force

This chapter investigates the most traditional part of strategy – use of force – in the war in Donbas. If the volunteer battalions “saved the country,” it is crucial to understand how they managed to do this, with and against who, and in what kind of environment. While the war in Donbas has been understood as a new kind of “hybrid” war fought in a gray zone between war and peace, a closer investigation shows that in many ways it remained a representative case of a contemporary armed conflict. The ways and means employed to reach limited ends were more traditional than novel: control of territory was sought through use of superior force (Freedman 2019, 176).

Herein lies the puzzle discussed in the first section: considering the centrality of people, especially during the early phases of the war, one could have reasonably expected the war to rapidly escalate into anarchy. Despite the resistance put up both by volunteer battalions and their non-state opponents (Matveeva 2018) against attempts to control them discussed in [Chapter 5](#), the war nevertheless took a traditional form. This begs the question why. The simple answer is that despite everything, the belligerents held similar understandings of war and their role in it. This resulted in a rather conventional conflict.

Subsequent sections divide the first year of the war into three chronological phases that followed the Maidan Revolution and the Russian annexation of Crimea: subversion, war between people, and the war that was. A further section investigates what volunteers called “police operations” that focused not on fighting, but rather on establishing order. Two caveats are immedi-

ately necessary. First, these phases should first and foremost be understood to illustrate gradual escalation of both state involvement and intensity of violence in the conflict. While state involvement and the intensity of the conflict were intrinsically linked, both separatists and volunteer battalions sought to escalate the war. Various armed groups had their own wills, which did not necessarily match those of their state sponsors. As escalation led to greater state participation, it also contributed to conventionalizing the war. Secondly, as Olexa emphasized, the war started at different times in different places. Because local conditions varied, the conflict did not escalate in a uniform manner in eastern Ukraine. Central to escalation was the role played by local elites, who sought to use the threat of separatism to blackmail concessions from the new rulers in Kyiv (Kudelia 2016, 12; Malyarenko 2016, 353; Matsuzato 2017, 178). For most local elites this was a gamble with high stakes which went horribly wrong. The sixth section assesses the use of volunteer force in the war in Donbas, including its long-term utility. The concluding seventh section in turn looks at the protracted war that followed the second Minsk ceasefire agreement, and which was only ended by the large-scale Russian invasion in February 2022.

A Conventional War

According to a poll conducted April 8–16, 2014, by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS), over 70 percent of respondents in the Donetsk oblast and 61 percent in the Luhansk oblast viewed the Maidan protest as a Western-sponsored coup d'état executed by the political opposition. Respectively, 63 and 58 percent perceived Crimea's annexation as the result of the free will of Crimean inhabitants, while 56 percent in Donetsk and 52 percent in Luhansk believed civil war in Ukraine possible. These figures were significantly higher than elsewhere in eastern Ukraine (Zerkalo Nedeli 2014a). They did not bode well for peace.

The Russian annexation of Crimea began the Russian spring, a wave of pro-Russian separatism in eastern Ukraine. However, the

initial protests between February and April 2014 were not only (or even predominantly) about separation from Ukraine or joining Russia. Most protests opposed radical pro-Ukrainian nationalism and the Maidan Revolution, while others emphasized regional autonomy or federalization, Russian language rights, defending the discredited Berkut, and joining the Eurasian Customs Union (Giuliano 2018, 160). In virtually all major cities in the east, protesters followed the example of the Maidan: they gathered in public places, constructed protest camps, built barriers from car tires, held speeches, organized self-defense groups, and served food for those present (J. Carroll 2017). When protesters escalated the conflict, they also occupied administrative buildings, set up kangaroo courts for officials, and employed social media to publicize their use of force (Matsuzato 2017, 190; Pieniżek 2017).

Separatists were emboldened by the swift and successful Russian annexation of Crimea, the crisis of the legitimacy of the Ukrainian state, and the weak resistance. Local law enforcement bodies felt powerless. As one Donetsk police officer noted concerning anti-Maidan protestors, “if the orders come down to resist these people, it would be impossible to comply” (Shuster 2014). Some of his colleagues were more sympathetic or sided outright with the protestors. Putin’s declaration that Russia would intervene if Russian lives were threatened was given credibility by the massing of thousands of troops along Ukraine’s borders.

Nevertheless, Donbas was not Crimea. After the occupation and annexation of Crimea, the element of surprise was lost. And whereas the state had been too weak to oppose the annexation of Crimea, it had now grown stronger. Moreover, some considered Crimea a special case because of its history – it had only been incorporated into Ukraine in 1954 – while Donbas was an inseparable part of the nation. In any case, getting Crimea back from Russia in the immediate future appeared unlikely, and would no doubt have led to severe casualties. In comparison, any attempts at secession in the east constituted a potentially existential threat to Ukraine. And as the lines at the military commissariats testified,

there was a newly found will to defend Ukrainian sovereignty. In Donbas, unlike Crimea, separatism would meet resistance.

Even Russia showed much less resolve in Donbas than in Crimea. It reacted opportunistically, rather than according to a well-prepared plan (Freedman 2019; Kofman et al. 2017; Matveeva 2018). Ultimately, the ends Moscow and Kyiv sought in Donbas differed from those in Crimea. As Matsuzato argues, "Donbass is different from Crimea simply because Russia does not need it, while Ukraine does not miss it. Donbass does not have the strategic value that Sevastopol has ... The Donbass economy does not complement Russia's economy." While Kyiv no doubt sought to preserve Ukrainian territorial integrity, the nearly seven million voters in Crimea and Donbas were largely pro-Russian. Without them "Ukraine's electoral balance will shift significantly toward supporters of Euromaidan ideas" (Matsuzato 2017, 178).

Neither were local dynamics in Crimea and Donbas the same. Compared to Crimea, Donbas was much larger, and its residents more varied in their ethnic makeup and political views. That said, Elise Giuliano argues that different ethnic identities did not adhere to entirely different political ideologies. Drawing on the same April KIIS poll discussed above, Giuliano shows that separatism enjoyed minority support even in Donetsk and Luhansk. Nevertheless, the minorities supporting separatism "were relatively substantial, indicating that there was a core of Donbas residents who formed a support base for separatism. This tells us that despite Russia's policy of paying and busing in people to participate in separatist protests, many separatist supporters originated locally" (Giuliano 2018, 161).

The question of local support of separatism remains politically charged. The official Ukrainian position was that the conflict was between Russia and Ukraine. Separatist leaders were thus relegated to mere Russian proxies without autonomy, and domestic factors were silenced. Similar views were held by the interviewed volunteers and veterans of the Ukrainian armed forces. Simultaneously, these interviews and published narratives of volunteer battalion fighters, among others, portrayed local support for separatism as

a recurrent fact (for examples, see Hladka et al. 2017). The official Russian position denied participation in what it framed an internal problem of Ukraine, a civil war. Between these polarized monochrome extremes was a middle position, which held that

there was sufficient alienation from Kyiv to provide a baseline for a local civil conflict, and that alienation fed off a long-standing tradition of social distance in Donbas identity, but that all the key triggers that produced all-out war were provided by Russia and by local elites in the Donbas. (Wilson 2016, 631)

The merit in this middle position is that it encompasses both endogenous and exogenous factors necessary for understanding conflict and its ambiguities and contradictions in its own context (Zaharchenko 2015). As becomes clear, time and again local separatists were reluctant to escalate the conflict and to assume responsibility once outsiders had done so (Matveeva 2018, 128–32). Without Russian intervention the local support for separatism after the Maidan Revolution would not have escalated to the extent it did (Matsuzato 2017; Toal 2017; Wilson 2016). Finally, Russia's reliance on brute force in Donbas must be interpreted as a failure to reach ends through the use of other, primarily nonmilitary ways and means.

As Wilson argues, separatism in Donbas was “a triple failure”: the conflict was cooling down before Girkin fanned the flames by capturing Sloviansk in April. The next failures were the protests in Kharkiv and Odesa, as well as the feeble local appeal of Novorossiia, a separatist political project largely abandoned in May. The third failure came in August, when Russian regulars had to intervene directly in the Battle of Ilovaisk to save separatists from being overrun by Ukrainian forces (Wilson 2016, 632–33). As will be discussed in [Chapter 7](#), Russian failures in Donbas in 2014 paved way for the large-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

The centrality of the people in the war nevertheless raises the question as to why the war remained limited and took a traditional form. The simple answer is that the war appeared tradi-

tional because it was a conventional war. Initially, some attempts at guerrilla warfare arose, especially as separatists were consolidating power in Donetsk. In practice, guerrilla actions often resulted in the assassination of people associated with the other side. These operations were always dangerous, and often executed by inexperienced people who resorted to improvisation. Soon deemed too risky for the limited effect, the focus moved to replicating conventional military roles in the absence of the state. These roles were based on traditional understandings of war, emphasizing conventions and hence norms, or “expectations about appropriate conduct which serve as common guidelines for social action” (Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner 2006, 272). With all belligerents holding similar understandings of war and what combatants should do in it, the result was a rather conventional war (Käihkö 2021).

The war in Donbas shows how these conventional ideas of war proved insufficient when put to the test. The war was not reducible to a confrontation between two similarly armed and organized forces. As volunteers began to capture territory, they became the “owners” of territory inhabited by politically polarized populations. Here use of force could not be limited to mere fighting but also, in the absence of political authority, required creating and maintaining political order over people who may not have supported it. While the volunteers’ notions of war helped them with matters of a narrow military nature, they assisted little with the other, inherently political tasks. In comparison, the veterans of the armed forces interviewed paid little, if any, attention to the political side of the conflict. Entering the war later and often operating behind the volunteers in supporting roles before the front lines became fixed, they focused on the armed opposition instead of the civilian population. Perhaps enhanced by stronger identities as military professionals, their experiences were to a greater degree apolitical. This was a luxury the volunteers did not enjoy, especially during the first six months of the war. The upshot was hasty improvisation, not always very successful.

To understand the use of force in the war in Donbas, it is necessary to understand the political context. Behind Ukrainian strat-

egy was “Post-Euromaidan euphoria,” which contributed to “the frequently non-systemic, illogical and incomprehensive nature of Kyiv’s strategic decisions, in particular during the first months of war,” and which limited room for negotiated settlement: “Any compromise would have been seen as a national reproach or treason” (Malyarenko 2016, 364). The post-revolution power vacuum in turn empowered both separatists and volunteers, with the former drawing inspiration from the Russian spring, the latter the Spirit of 2014. This did not necessarily lead to better strategy. As Freedman (2019, 171) notes, “the determination to push hard against the separatists while the opportunity was there meant that the Ukrainian effort was uncoordinated and opportunistic. When Russian forces entered in numbers, Ukrainian forces struggled to cope, and tactical decision making was often poor.”

With the capture of Sloviansk in April 2014, the war became one between people. The emphasis on people does not mean the absence of state actors. The immediate reaction of the Ukrainian interim government to the separatist takeover was to commence the ATO. This operation foundered almost immediately, with soldiers surrendering to separatists. State actors were simply not the main actors, as people who held contrasting political ideas mobilized against each other in a situation characterizing the Ukrainian state as weak willed and lacking capacity. Like the volunteer battalions, and despite accusations of Russian backing from early on (Wilson 2014, 129–30; Yekelchuk 2020, 126), even the separatists of the self-proclaimed DPR and LPR were “more patchwork than united front” (Tavernise and Herszenhorn 2014).

While volunteer battalions on one side and separatists on the other were supported by Kyiv and Moscow, respectively, emphasizing people underlines the political dimension of this war. This dimension is also visible in the tasks conducted by the volunteer battalions. Dmitriy, an early volunteer of Azov, described the war as “an inner conflict” with “difficult social-political situations in [the] country.” Consequently, most early volunteer battalion missions were “police missions” (discussed in more detail later in this chapter) like “crowd control” and catching separatists. These tasks

illustrate the political intimacy of the conflict and the central role volunteer battalions played in its murky particulars.

The third phase of the war began with the Battle of Ilovaisk in August 2014. In this main engagement of the war, the conflict escalated into proper war as Russian regulars intervened to fight the combined Ukrainian forces. Both the armed forces and especially the volunteer battalions were outcoordinated, outgunned, and outmaneuvered. After Ilovaisk, Ukraine sued for ceasefire, which led to a hasty agreement signed in Minsk on September 5.

Skirmishes continued until a separatist offensive in January 2015 led to the capture first of Donetsk airport and later the strategically important transport hub Debaltseve. While the Ukrainian forces were again defeated, they inflicted a much higher cost on their opponents than in Ilovaisk. After a new round of negotiations and the intervention of German chancellor Angela Merkel and French president François Hollande, the “Package of Measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements” – or Minsk II – was brokered. The 13-point Minsk II was supposed to provide a roadmap for resolving the conflict. Instead, the conflict soon froze. As both sides dug in, the contact line between forces became fixed. The same appeared to be the case with the war.

From Revolution to Subversion

The roots of the conflict that followed the Maidan Revolution had little to do with Yanukovich, who quickly became a spent force. As one of journalist Paweł Pieniążek’s (2017, 25) interviewees noted at the time, “the new administration is targeted and becomes an embodiment of evil. Yanukovich has been erased from the collective memory very quickly. ‘What does Yanukovich have to do with this? He doesn’t rule in Kiev.’”

In Donbas, the question of separatism did not neatly segregate the populace into opposite poles. Residents overwhelmingly (68 percent) supported joining the Eurasian Customs Union and opposed “nationalist radicals,” especially Right Sector; meanwhile, 10 percent preferred the European Union, 10 percent were

uncertain, and 9 percent abstained (Giuliano 2018, 162). The visible roles played by some of these radical nationalists, such as Right Sector and the Svoboda party, likely affected the results (Ishchenko 2016, 469). This domestic political context has been lacking in many analyses of the war in Donbas – not least Ukrainian ones. As a result, much of the first phase of the war remains unaccounted for.

Outright separatism enjoyed some local support in Donbas. Demands for federalization and later separatism harked back to the days of the Orange Revolution in 2004, when elites in the east used similar threats to gain leverage (Wilson 2015a). Even ten years later, some local elites like the oligarch Rinat Akhmetov and Oleksandr Yefremov, the Party of Regions' leader in Verkhovna Rada, hedged their bets and initially supported the separatists (Laryš and Souleimanov 2022; Wilson 2014, 130–31), with Yefremov later arrested for this (Interfax-Ukraine 2019b). Just as some oligarchs who supported Kyiv felt they would lose if separatists gained power – and hence supported the volunteer battalions – others felt they could gain by supporting anti-Maidan forces. This latter group of oligarchs included both Ukrainians and Russians.

On February 25, 2014, mere days after the flight of Yanukovych, the then acting interior minister Avakov disbanded Berkut and dismissed its officers. His decision echoed the infamous Coalition Provisional Authority Order 2, which envisaged dissolving Iraqi military and security structures after occupation by the American-led coalition in 2003. In Ukraine the government's decision meant that up to 5,000 security officers became unemployed. Many had been recruited from the east and the south, and those deployed to the Maidan had reason to fear persecution. Many of them joined the anti-Maidan protestors (Giuliano 2018, 167–68; Hladka et al. 2017, 64–65; Kudelia 2016, 10), thus becoming means that Russia could support against Ukraine (Wilson 2014, 127). Soon after, the 12,000-strong police force in Donetsk oblast was purged; a mere 5,000 remained in office (Matsuzato 2017, 186).

For lack of a better term, the first phase of the conflict that began immediately after the Maidan Revolution can be called

“subversive.” Subversion is a Cold War concept in some ways comparable to the more contemporary hybrid warfare. Both concepts are ambiguous and imprecise and hence useful as they can take on whatever contents desired. Both subversion (Trinquier 2006) and hybrid warfare envisage a broadening of war from mere use of force to encompassing also nonviolent means. Both threaten to make wars total. Two qualities nevertheless make subversion a better concept than hybrid warfare. First, subversion does not contain the nouns “warfare” or “war,” which immediately imply that the activity belongs to the military. Subversion is more appropriate because it can be interpreted to include little or no violence. As a result, subversion can even encompass events like the so-called color revolutions, which are essentially political contestations. This is ultimately the second reason for employing this term: the notion that only adversaries engage in hybrid warfare questions its analytical value as a neutral concept. This has no doubt contributed to the neglect of local dynamics as a consideration. In Ukraine the division that followed the revolution meant that states joined the plethora of actors involved in subversive activities, not all of which were part of some nefarious grand plan, but rather the result of hastily improvised tactical decisions.

The first anti-government demonstrations in the east began on March 1, when thousands of participants gathered for pro-Russian and anti-Maidan rallies. In Kharkiv, the former capital and Ukraine’s second largest city, thousands broke through police barricades and stormed the administration building, which had been occupied by around 500 pro-Maidan activists for six days. The Kharkiv mayor Gennady Kernes was present and called for calm, but left the scene when the building was stormed. Police in turn stood by as activists were dragged from the building and forced to run the gauntlet of a sea of angry protestors (Gorst 2014). In Donetsk protestors chose Pavel Gubarev as the “people’s governor.” He replaced the Ukrainian flag in front of the Oblast State Administration (OSA) building with a Russian one.

Still reeling from the loss of Crimea, the Ukrainian government’s reaction was muted. As Pieniążek (2017, 20) observed, “at

the beginning of the conflict you may get the impression that Kiev hardly cares what will happen to Donbas.” Again, the authorities in Kyiv found themselves in a difficult situation. Inactivity might encourage separatism like it had in Crimea. Yet any use of force potentially encouraged Russian invasion, as with Georgia in 2008. On March 1, Putin gave authorization to use force in Ukraine in order to protect Russian lives. To make matters worse, Yanukovich – whom Russia continued to recognize as the legitimate ruler of Ukraine – publicly appealed Putin to restore him to power. Yanukovich’s appeal posed the largest threat to the government, which had to organize new elections as soon as possible (UNIAN 2018a). With few means at its disposal, Kyiv nominated oligarchs as governors in the eastern oblasts and charged them with restoring order through their patrimonial networks and funds.

On March 2, Sergei Taruta was appointed governor of the Donetsk oblast, having been identified by Ihor Kolomoisky as one of the oligarchs who could suppress separatism, although he only became governor because fellow oligarch Rinat Akhmetov declined the position. Taruta came from Mariupol and wielded influence in Donbas. Unlike other oligarchs there, he had no history of supporting pro-Russian politics. Most accounts deem Taruta’s governorship a failure. Described as out of touch with reality, Taruta failed to nip separatism in the bud, appearing in fact to ignore it altogether (Pieniążek 2017, 11; Platonova 2022, 215–16; VICE News 2014a; Wilson 2014, 133). He also had a habit of speaking out against the government in Kyiv (Matsuzato 2017, 186–87). To be fair, as suggested by the KIIS poll, Donetsk was the most difficult region to govern in the aftermath of the Maidan Revolution.

While Taruta’s inactivity might be explained as an attempt to de-escalate the conflict, he claims he was in fact seeking to do the opposite. He believes that after he was appointed governor, “it was possible to neutralize the militants by small forces of army special forces” (personal communication). While these forces were available in Donetsk, as a civilian Taruta had no authority to “lead” the forces. According to Taruta, he “repeatedly appealed to Kiev,

to the leadership of the country, and urged them to give an order to use military forces against militants.” This order was not given, ostensibly because

the leaders in Kiev were afraid to provoke Russia to a large-scale military invasion. As a result, Donetsk was captured by militants inspired by the Russian military. I was forced to leave Donetsk. My house in Donetsk was taken over by terrorists, I left home in one suit and did not even have time to take with me an album with family photos.

As other actors escalated the situation, Taruta became irrelevant. Gubarev’s forces seized the OSA building on March 3 and 6 but did not hold it. The SBU arrested Gubarev on the latter date and took him to Kyiv. Separatists subsequently organized a coordinating council in which about 40 organizations and representatives from all over Donetsk participated. The conflict claimed its first victim in the east on March 13, when the Svoboda party spokesman was killed in yet another pro-unity march. No serious police investigation of the case followed. Intimidated, pro-Ukrainians lost their capacity to mobilize forces (Matsuzato 2017, 190).

Significant quarrels and disagreements vexed the various separatist forces, which ranged from the most aggressive Russian-led activists to more timid local anti-Maidan protestors and Russian Cossacks who refused to recognize other separatists (Matveeva 2018). And while the interests of separatists and Russia aligned, they were not necessarily the same (Toal 2017, 239). This was especially the case regarding the incorporation of Donbas into Russia, which Russia dismissed outright. Undeterred, separatists believed that they could force Russia’s hand. Lacking a clear strategy, they hoped the capture of administration buildings and territory would prompt Russian annexation, just like in Crimea (Judah 2015, xxv; Wilson 2014, 133).

There were, nevertheless, limits to what subversion with limited use of force could deliver. On April 6, separatists occupied the OSA buildings in Donetsk, Kharkiv, and Luhansk. Taruta and his staff had no choice but to relocate within the city, as the separatists

proclaimed the sovereignty of their “people’s republics.” To give secession a veil of legitimacy and to justify Russian intervention, the separatists deemed it necessary to hold referendums to prove that unification was the will of “the people.” Referendums were announced for May 11, but they required the use of force. Avakov described the situation in early April:

We had to put out a fire. There were 3 centers of anti-Ukrainian protests created by Russian agents: Luhansk, Donetsk and Kharkiv. It was obvious to the government led by acting-president Olexander Turchinov, that it was the general scenario for destabilization, being performed by the Secret Services of the Russian Federation. (Quoted in Butusov 2016)

The government considered the problem endogenous and emanating across the border, instead of indigenous and arising from within Ukraine. With its legitimacy in question and its security services in disarray, the state had few means of tackling the issue. Recognition of Russia as the source of trouble did not alter the fear of Russian reaction to Ukrainian use of force.

In early April, illustrating the need to tread carefully, neither the regional head of the SBU nor Turchynov were willing to approve an operation to use force to free the Donetsk administration building (Matsuzato 2017, 187). The situation was similar in Luhansk (Khudetska 2014). But after Crimea, indifference was not an option. Avakov succinctly summarized the dilemma faced by the government:

Any blood would be used by the Russian Federation as the means for active intervention and for their disinformation campaign in support of the terrorism. But in case of armed resistance by the Russian protesters, we would had [*sic*] to eliminate the threat because negotiations with the terrorists were intolerable. (Quoted in Butusov 2016; see also Hladka et al. 2017, 65)

As the former governor of Kharkiv, Avakov became responsible for dealing with separatism there. On April 8, he ordered the storming of the occupied regional administration building. While the

successful operation allowed Avakov to proclaim that he “broke the ‘Kharkiv People’s Republic’s’ backbone and defeated the Russian aggression for the first time ... without shedding any blood” (quoted in Butusov 2016), the case nevertheless illustrates several implications for the use of force. What Avakov did not mention was that the mayor of Kharkiv – who had posed with the St. George’s ribbon associated with separatism and left the scene when pro-Maidan activists were forcibly removed from the administration building – was almost killed by a sniper (Roth 2014). Avakov had to personally command the forces that stormed the administration building – but still failed to secure the participation of army special forces, the SBU, and several MoIA special forces. In the end, Avakov relied on a single National Guard unit reinforced by local “patriots.” And while those arrested at the building “were charged and sent to trial where they received different sentences” (Butusov 2016), it was still the “patriots” who ultimately kept a lid on subversive activities, such as protests. As the head of Odesa self-defense Ruslan Forostyak explained, when “patriots” later stopped separatists there, they “did what the government should have done” (quoted in Kramer 2014). From the perspective of those critical of the government, government support legitimized vigilantism. As some volunteers put it, the volunteers became “little black men” – the antidote for the “little green men.” When the two met, the result was a war between people.

War Between People

The occupation of the Sloviansk district center on April 12 by a 52-strong band led by Girkin was the first major turning point of the war. In fact, while no doubt self-servingly taking credit, Girkin later boasted that he “pulled [the] trigger of war” and hence escalated the situation into an armed conflict. According to Girkin, without this escalation, the whole Russian spring would have foundered, as it had in the cities of Kharkiv and Odesa: “It was in fact our unit that gave the war ... its momentum” (quoted in *Insider* 2017).

After capturing Sloviansk, separatists rapidly escalated the war by seizing Artimivsk (in 2016 renamed Bakhmut), Debaltseve, and Kramatorsk. Checkpoints adorned with Russian flags were erected outside these towns. Yet Girkin later bitterly lamented that Russian support never matched his expectations. More importantly, he was shocked that Russia did not repeat the Crimean scenario after the seizure of territory in Donbas (Toal 2017, 259).

While Girkin's force relocated from Crimea after Russia annexed the peninsula, there is little evidence of significant Russian support to separatists before Sloviansk. Girkin has been described as an operative of the main directorate of the general staff of the armed forces of the Russian Federation (GRU) (Wilson 2014, 130), but open-source evidence also suggests that he had links with the FSB while in Donbas and after (Bellingcat 2022). What nevertheless remains unclear is the degree to which his actions were coordinated, let alone controlled, by Russia. Girkin certainly made the most of this ambiguity. Regardless of whether or not he enjoyed official Russian backing, he exemplifies the change of leadership as the early separatist leaders were arrested by Ukrainian security forces and replaced with others "with ties to Russian security services, military experience, and associations with business interests in Russia" (Kofman et al. 2017, 38).

The first firefight of the war occurred on April 13, resulting in the death of a captain of the Ukrainian armed forces. With the capture of Sloviansk, the government's strategy of de-escalation was in ruins. And as one member of parliament admitted, in early April the government had few means at its disposal in Donbas: "We didn't have any troops there, but only 2,000 police officers who refused to obey orders, and who were not ready to retake the seized buildings and defend their Motherland" (Anton Herashenko, quoted in Hladka et al. 2017, 68). Faced with a reprise of the Crimean scenario, Turchynov launched the ATO to counter separatism. Described as a "full-scale" military operation led by the SBU, the ATO proceeded "gradually, responsibly and in a measured way." In addition to Russian special forces and terrorists, the ATO also targeted "hundreds of people who have been

deceived by Russian propaganda” (Oliphant 2014). According to Turchynov, the ATO aimed to “protect Ukrainian citizens, to stop the terror, to stop the crime, to stop the attempts to tear our country apart.” While the ATO, however inaccurately named, was framed as a domestic operation in order to avoid escalating the situation with Russia, Russia reportedly responded that Ukraine had to choose between tanks or talks (BBC News 2014b).

The ATO can be best understood as a domestic counterinsurgency operation, which commenced on April 15. On April 17, soldiers from the 25th Airborne Brigade attempted to recapture Kramatorsk, a city south of Sloviansk. Surrounded by locals, they surrendered their equipment and half a dozen armored vehicles, including a 120 mm NONA self-propelled mortar, to separatists (Hladka et al. 2017, 99, 106; Pieniżek 2017, 80–81). The case again emphasizes the importance of the creation of force, while the political dimension of the war also made itself known in other ways. Turchynov later lamented that “at the initial stages, the local residents brainwashed by the Russian propaganda were as much of a challenge as the militants and the Russian troops” (quoted in Hladka et al. 2017, 99). Without orders from above and without training in counterinsurgency or war among the people, Ukrainian soldiers by and large refused to use force. As General Khomchak described:

We weren’t ready, our soldiers, our officers, we weren’t ready to fire at our own people ... as we are the People’s Army, we didn’t harm the people ... But when the armed people appeared from behind their [the unarmed civilians’] backs, then maybe we should have had to shoot at those armed people ... Those were not Russians but Donbas residents shooting at us, though we did them no harm. That was a psychological moment. They were ready to kill us, without any hesitation, while Ukrainian soldiers weren’t ready to kill them. (Quoted in Hladka et al. 2017, 87–88)

The main issue in the war thus centered around people. In 2018 several members of the 25th Airborne cited local ties to explain the betrayal of their comrades. Half of the brigade came from the

region; some were sympathetic to the anti-Maidan protestors, and many found it impossible to use force against civilians. Even with its newfound will, the state at this time lacked the ways and means to tackle separatism.

Struggling with limited forces and limited control over them, the government initially prioritized containing urban areas until it could mobilize more force: as Avakov noted, “we were entirely focused on big cities” (quoted in Hladka et al. 2017, 73). Perceiving urban fighting to be too costly, prioritizing cities meant that the government otherwise sought to contain the ATO zone “to keep the dangers from spreading beyond its boundaries ... We had to stop this plague from spreading, and the enemy militant groups from advancing” (Ruslan Khomchak, quoted in Hladka et al. 2017, 87). Yet even then, on April 30 Turchynov admitted that “the government forces were ‘helpless’ to quell the unrest in some parts of the east, saying the goal was now to prevent it from spreading” (quoted in BBC News 2014c). The following day he reinstated conscription, but in the meantime a strategy of containment executed with few means meant that most available forces were tasked to encircle Girkin’s forces in Sloviansk.

Owing to the state’s weakness, Girkin recalled in 2014, in the early stages of the war it was possible to achieve much with very little. Because of the opposition to Kyiv among parts of the population in the east, heavy weapons were deemed unnecessary (*Insider* 2017). Yet he also admitted that “Donetsk and Luhansk cannot stand against the Ukrainian army alone ... Initially, we assumed ‘the Crimean scenario’. Nobody wanted fighting for Donetsk and Luhansk republics. We thought – the Russian administration would come ... It would be one more republic in the Russian Federation” (quoted in Malyarenko 2016, 357). Left unsaid was that Girkin had very little to work with in Donbas. Local support for insurgency was lukewarm at best. Escalation of the situation required leadership, supplies, and, not least, more motivated foreign fighters (Matveeva 2018, 105–11). Substantial numbers of the last began to arrive from Russia in May.

With security forces focused on big cities and passive containment of the “orange plague” (Hladka et al. 2017, 53), volunteers sought to escalate the situation. Journalist Denys Kazansky described the situation in mid-April as follows:

The separatist plague continued to spread to the enclaves captured by the militants, but it didn't spread to the enclaves we controlled, though some of them were armed. In other words, they didn't enlarge their territories if we were there. Nothing was happening. If it hadn't been for the dobrobats (volunteer battalions) who started to open fire, I don't know how it could have ended ... The dobrobats (volunteer battalions) were the first to start firing. (Quoted in Hladka et al. 2017, 105)

Frustrated with what Khomchak called the psychological barrier to escalate the use of force, volunteer battalions felt they had to lead by example, if not drag the state and its military to war. The reaction of one general to the first Right Sector action against a separatist checkpoint on April 20 is telling: “you have destroyed the peace process; you have started a war with Russia!” (quoted in Bukkvoll 2019, 297).

Volunteer escalation did not rely on force alone, but also on political protest, especially in Kyiv where, after the Maidan Revolution, they enjoyed widespread support. In a concrete sign of escalation and polarization, combatants began to take their masks off as fear of legal consequences faded. Simultaneously, both volunteers and separatists began to perceive that capture equaled a death sentence. Female volunteers had even more to fear. Whereas the separatists viewed regular soldiers as functionaries and described them as brothers, they demonized the more ideological volunteers (Kots and Steshin 2014). Escalation of violence was limited by the way neither side sought to actively dehumanize ordinary people.

The suppression of separatism in Kharkiv was successful because of the role played by “patriots.” Later attempts to suppress separatism in Odesa led to bloodshed. On May 2, a soccer match between FC Chornomorets Odesa and FC Metalist Kharkiv

brought thousands of people to the city, where they planned to march for the “Unity of Ukraine.” Obstructed by anti-Maidan protestors, clashes erupted. First, opposing sides pelted each other with stones, then with Molotov cocktails and self-made grenades, before the numerically inferior anti-Maidan activists resorted to firearms. After both sides incurred casualties, the anti-Maidan activists fled to the House of Trade Unions, which caught fire. The day claimed 48 lives, including 42 in the building itself. Many more were injured. There were three major takeaways from these events: the security forces were neutral at best, and fifth columnists at worst; the conflict would grow increasingly violent further east where separatism was stronger; and it would be the *people* who executed this violence (Hladka et al. 2017, 73, 76, 79–80). The violence led to further polarization, particularly in Donetsk and Luhansk (Matsuzato 2017, 192; Matveeva 2018, 100). A week later, on May 9, the southeastern port city of Mariupol fell to separatists.

On May 11, the separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk held their hastily organized referendums. No international observers monitored the voting. With the bulk of forces concentrated in Sloviansk, the National Guard violently interrupted voting in nearby Kramatorsk. Nevertheless, Kyiv did little to stop the referendum, aside from making the obvious objection that a sub-national referendum was illegal according to Ukrainian law. The referendums gave separatism legitimacy, which significantly boosted morale: “The referendum was the symbolic end of opposition to the separatists. From now on nobody will dare challenge them” (Pieniżek 2017, 100).

During the Ukrainian presidential elections two weeks later, the government deemed Donbas irrelevant. Election committees in separatist-held areas received no assistance, even when some locals risked their lives on behalf of a united Ukraine. In the end, 20 percent of polling stations were open and only about 10 percent of voters participated (Pieniżek 2017, 101). Separatists not only boycotted the elections but also sabotaged them to the best of their capacity (Matsuzato 2017, 193).

Separatist leaders considered Russia's biggest mistake in the conflict the recognition of Petro Poroshenko, a billionaire politician who won the elections, as the legitimate representative of Ukraine. According to Girkin, "from that moment, with international recognition, we began to suffer." Following recognition of Poroshenko's legitimacy, the army "found the commander-in-chief, and they began to carry out his orders. In late April or early May they did not fight against us. They went out to serve in positions and looked in all directions in order to join the winner" (quoted in *Insider* 2017). On May 17, Girkin posted a now-removed video online in which he despaired over the lack of local support for separatism. While claiming the abundance of arms and ammunition, he struggled to find even 1,000 willing to fight for his cause (Chalupa 2014; Matveeva 2018, 110–11). From the spark struck by Girkin, little fire ignited.

Poroshenko assumed office on June 7. Though he took a hard line against separatists, he also reached out to Russia and sought to de-escalate the violence through unilateral ceasefires. With Russia's recognition of Poroshenko's victory, fear of Yanukovych's return disappeared. And while the Ukrainian state and army had initially been too weak to oppose the annexation of Crimea, it now grew stronger. During his presidential campaign, Poroshenko pledged to bring the conflict to a quick end. When elected, he declared that he would "try to win the trust of those who didn't vote for me" but ruled out any negotiations with separatists. When he promised to end the war "in hours" (Luhn and Walker 2014), force was bound to be used.

Before Poroshenko the state strategy was largely passive and focused on containment. Volunteers in turn moved back and forth, stopping to fight back when getting shot at before withdrawing to rest. Even as the armed forces became more involved in the war, the volunteer battalions harnessed higher morale to continue to spearhead assaults against separatists. On June 13, after the armed forces refused to enter Mariupol, Ukrainian special forces and the Azov and Dnipro-1 battalions took on the mission and captured the city from the estimated 60–80 armed separatists who had not

fled before them (Colborne 2022, 34). Azov planned this operation, but the battalion had to wait for the green light from Kyiv before commencing the operation. The approval only came after a general of the National Guard pleaded on Azov's behalf (Bukkvoll 2019, 4).

Several accounts deemed the Ukrainian army low-quality and reluctant to engage separatists head on. Pieniżek (2017, 142; see also Robinson 2016, 115) observed how Ukrainian artillery “always reinforce the infantry. No serious action can be successful without them.” The armed forces' reliance on artillery led to numerous accusations of indiscriminate shelling of civilian targets – accusations denied by virtually all Ukrainians interviewed. Some claimed that Ukrainian artillerymen would only fire into settlements when they had specific information on where separatists were located. Such information could be provided especially by civilian informants, and later drones. One Ukrainian military expert provided a technical explanation for hitting civilian targets: it is possible that the poor condition of the shells used early in the war caused them to fall way short of their intended targets. Regardless, artillery proved poor means for a counterinsurgency campaign as shelling contributed to polarization. According to Matsuzato: “Standing little chance in soldier-to-soldier combat, the Ukrainian army began to surround the cities controlled by the DPR and LPR and shell them indiscriminately, without even sending spotters. This war crime provoked the undying hatred of the Donbas population toward Kyiv” (Matsuzato 2017, 193; see also Freedman 2019, 171; Kudelia 2016; Matveeva 2018, 109, 145–47).

Separatists did little better. As Aleksandr and other servicemen insisted, the separatists provoked Ukrainian artillery fire by placing mortars and tanks in populated areas (Matveeva 2018, 147; see also Pieniżek 2017, 178). Offering no concrete evidence, several interviewees from Donbas claimed that some of the shelling of civilian areas may well have been the result of feuding between different groups of separatists. Conflating separatists and Russians, these interviewees furthermore claimed that “Russians” targeted residential areas specifically to polarize the situation. Describing

the situation in Kramatorsk, Matsuzato (2018, 1023) notes that accepting a similar interpretation “has become something like a loyalty test for national-patriots.” What is certain is that escalating violence both cowed civilians and made them take up arms. At the same time, escalating violence prodded the military to action. As Aleksandr described, mounting casualties among the Ukrainian armed forces – now typically caused by indirect fire because of greater capabilities even on the separatist side – increased the soldiers’ willingness to fight.

Following discussions with Putin, on June 20 Poroshenko presented a 15-point peace plan that offered amnesty to separatists. He also declared a unilateral week-long ceasefire in Donbas. Justified as giving the separatists a chance to disarm and to join a peace process, the ceasefire changed little, as separatists refused to lay down their weapons. Even after the extension of the ceasefire by three days (BBC News 2014d), negotiations led nowhere. Several volunteers maintain that the ceasefire was nothing less than treasonous. Prior to the ceasefire, volunteers had been gaining territory from fleeing separatists. Kazhan and Sviatoslav emphasized how Aidar had rapidly pushed close to the village of Metalist just north of the city of Luhansk when the unexpected ceasefire was announced. Ordered not to continue their offensive, the volunteers were stripped of the initiative. Unable to advance, they set up defensive block posts. Having offered little resistance before, separatists took advantage of the ceasefire to fortify their positions. When the ceasefire ended, Aidar found it impossible to dislodge the entrenched opponents even with a week-long artillery-led pounding.

The failed ceasefire led to a renewed military effort in the form of an all-out summer offensive. The offensive took the form of a pincer, which sought to isolate separatists from the border and Russian support, as well as Luhansk and Donetsk from each other (Matveeva 2018, 153–54). This offensive amounted to a major escalation of the conflict, again pushing separatists into a dire situation. As Girkin explained, “all July, starting with the exit from Sloviansk, until August 6, we almost all the time retreated”

(quoted in *Insider* 2017). Girkin staved off the main Ukrainian forces for three months, allowing the referendums to be held. On July 5, his forces broke through the Ukrainian encirclement and reached Donetsk. For Malyarenko (2016, 354), Girkin's arrival in Donetsk formed the most important point of escalation in the conflict. Until then, little had changed there, with state institutions functioning almost as usual. Girkin immediately suspected that local elites had reached a deal with Kyiv. If such deals existed, his arrival made them impossible (Platonova 2022, 33). In August, Russian "vacationers" arrived, irrevocably changing the balance of forces.

Dismayed by the lack of Russian intervention and facing defeat, Alexander Borodai, the Russian prime minister of the self-proclaimed DPR, threatened Russia with massive flows of civilian refugees if more support was not provided (Coyle 2017, 75). The separatists' anti-aircraft capabilities alone suggest Russian support, which in July increased. At the beginning of the war, the Ukrainian military controlled the air. Even though the Ukrainian air forces had not received a single new aircraft after Ukraine became independent in 1991, its Soviet-era helicopters and planes could pound separatists and insert forces. This changed rapidly as separatists acquired anti-aircraft capacity. All in all, separatists downed three cargo planes, nine combat planes and ten helicopters in 2014 (Siminski 2014). As a result, Ukraine gradually lost this important force multiplier. After Moscow insisted on a total ban on the use of air power as part of the first Minsk agreement in September (Ponomarenko 2019), the only remaining airborne assets were drones. Aside from reconnaissance, some were later modified to drop grenades.

On July 17 a Russian Buk-M1 anti-aircraft missile shot down the Malaysian Airlines passenger plane MH-17 over Ukraine, killing 298 passengers and crewmembers. Ample evidence suggests that the missile came from the 53rd Anti-aircraft Missile Brigade based in Kursk, Russia (Bellingcat 2019; Coyle 2017, 105–7; Politie.nl 2018). The event serves as a prime example of how Russian provision of support to separatists threatened control of force. Even

direct curation of separatist leaders by Russian intelligence services proved insufficient (Bellingcat 2018b). Despite international condemnation and increased international economic sanctions, Russia began to reconsider its involvement in the war, which the separatists appeared to be losing. Moscow now made its assistance to separatists conditional on greater control. Several ideologically motivated separatist leaders with Russian origins like Borodai and Girkin were replaced with more manageable locals who, in the words of Borodai (quoted in Zverev 2017), could “try to show the West that the uprising was a grassroots phenomenon.”

By early August, combined Ukrainian forces continued to capture swaths of territory from separatists. In the process they met new resistance as indirect fire from Russian territory targeted units attempting to regain control of the Russian border. On the morning of July 11, 30 Ukrainian soldiers were killed and over 100 wounded in a single attack on a border post in Zelenopillya in Luhansk oblast. As Kazhan explained, whereas separatists could not shoot, the fire from across the border was accurate and devastating. Ukrainians were strictly forbidden to respond in order to avoid escalation (Kim 2014). Seeing no other way to defend themselves, some units crossed the border into Russia. The government strategy of double envelopment aimed to bring the border under government control. Left unexplained was how the combined Ukrainian forces could control border areas, when shelled from Russian territory and unable to shoot back.

To make matters worse, Ukrainian forces became overstretched. This proved disastrous as Russian regulars intervened. Before an investigation of the intervention of Russian regulars, it is, however, important to discuss the other kinds of main tasks performed by the volunteer battalions, often described as “police operations.”

“Police Operations”

The war between people was characterized by its low intensity, meaning that many volunteers and observers distinguished

“police” operations from later “military” operations that focused on front lines once the intensifying violence had led to their formation. While volunteers had prepared for war, many of them soon became involved with activities that were perhaps less dangerous than what they expected from military operations, but simultaneously more complex.

Early in the war there were no real front lines, but much confusion. After capturing territory, battalions often became the “owners” of the area. With local authorities either absent, indifferent, or hostile, public order and consolidation of political authority rested on the shoulders of the volunteer battalions. For instance, the Ukrainian journalist Yuriy Butusov recounts how the early part of the war was characterized by police rather than military action. In this situation, volunteer battalions like Donbas were established after the desertion of the Donetsk special police units. The battalion became a rallying point for patriots who sought to perform these duties (Butusov 2014). With little or no police training and armed with assault rifles, the volunteer battalions instilled order. This order was of a certain kind and left room for neither separatism nor separatists. The volunteers soon realized that what they were facing was not “real” war, but something much more complex and demanding. As Kazhan described the situation in the spring of 2014, half of Ukraine believed the war was a civil war. Not only did the people and their loyalties play a central role in the conflict, but enemies without uniforms operated among them. This raised familiar questions which counterinsurgents everywhere struggle with: Who is the enemy? How can they be identified? And, finally, how can they be eradicated?

In the early stages of the war many of the responses to the questions above had to be improvised. This was especially the case for the volunteer battalions. With volunteers almost immediately straddling boundaries between policiary and military tasks, any kind of opposition was suppressed, by force if necessary. Not always knowing what to do, volunteers began patrolling streets and villages. They drove around and stopped anyone deemed suspicious for questioning. Some were searched, typically with little

of interest found. While one volunteer described the aim as stopping infiltration and protecting infrastructure, these patrols more commonly served the purpose of a show of force. As one journalist recounted, a drunken man who called members of the Donbas Battalion “bloody right-wingers” was regarded as a separatist, brutally beaten, and arrested (Sibirtsev 2015). As Kazhan explained, “separatist talk” became an offense even in Aidar-controlled areas. Several were captured, and at least one person was “judged” for this. This said, Omega, a foreign volunteer, noted how surprised he was to see his Ukrainian comrades’ cool reaction when subjected to curses and fascist accusations by locals – often groups of elderly people. It appears safe to assume that the situation was worse on the separatist side.

Operations closer to the front line were murkier, and came to be called “sweep-and-clear” or “counter-sabotage work.” Before the *Myrotvorets* database was launched, Dnipro-1 took the initiative of creating its own equivalent to record people they stopped. The few casualties suffered in these operations indicates that many of the targets were unarmed. To give only one example, Dnipro-1’s losses numbered 30 dead and one missing during the entire war, with 17 killed at Ilovaisk (Hladka et al. 2017, 154). According to Yevhen Deidey, the superintendent of Kyiv-1 Battalion and later a member of parliament, clearing a city from separatists was nevertheless a difficult task. When the separatists

were surrounded, they changed their clothes, and passed themselves as local residents, actually quite often, they were locals ... It’s necessary to work with the local population, and it’s really hard because all of them are local residents, and you simply can’t distinguish separatists from among them ... only meticulous covert intelligence work with the local population could be of some help. In our practice, we did that all the time in the ATO zone. We sent our guys dressed in civilian clothes ... but we could do it only after the city was totally moppedup [*sic*]. (Quoted in Hladka et al. 2017, 124)

Considering the way one newspaper described military intelligence as equaling to little more than “binoculars and an observer” (Zerkalo Nedeli 2014b), it should hardly be a surprise that the reality often fell well short of “meticulous covert intelligence.” According to Dmitriy, early volunteer battalion operations were often about crowd control and capturing separatists. His description of crowd control was straightforward; with a volunteer battalion in a city, “nobody tried to make any ‘people[’s] republic’ there coz everybody knows – volunteers don’t give a fuck and kills [*sic*] everyone.” As Omega elaborated, the volunteers “in practice had almost godlike powers [in the areas they controlled] ... pretty few people want to start to argue with a person who is armed from head to toe.” The lack of state security forces early in the war meant that in many contested areas the volunteers constituted the main authority (Media Initiative Group for Human Rights 2017). The government blessing of vigilantes – the majority of them Ukrainian nationalists, some with extreme-right sympathies – no doubt exacerbated the political situation on the ground.

In Sviatoslav’s telling, early Aidar operations focused on collecting information about separatists and their sympathizers from locals. These targets were then taken out. Sviatoslav’s description implies a harrowing reality where civilians, fearing for their safety, sought to strike first against threats. In “liberated” areas, locals denounced those who helped separatists – and those they just disliked (Judah 2015, 199–200). It remains unclear what happened to collaborators after the battalions moved on. Other battalions like the one Omega served in were engaged in similar activities, but did so even in no-man’s land. Dmitriy was more succinct about these tasks. When asked how one captured a separatist, he explained that after receiving a hint from civilians or SBU, an “object was captured. And tortured.” At times, “somebody died.” For Dmitriy, this was nothing more than a reality of war, although a reality made worse by weak control of force. As he put it, there is no “military conflict with ‘good guys’” – just “us” and “them.”

As the defeat at Ilovaisk exposed, the intelligence capabilities of the Ukrainian side were inadequate. That said, at times volun-

teer battalions did receive information from intelligence agencies. More often the untrained volunteers, threatened by an invisible enemy, had to improvise. As a result, Amnesty International (2014, 2) worried that the volunteer battalions would “replicate in the areas they retake, the lawlessness and abuses that have prevailed in separatist-held areas,” and in so doing risking “significantly aggravating tensions in the east of the country and undermining the proclaimed intentions of the new Ukrainian authorities to strengthen and uphold the rule of law more broadly.” The lack of preparedness as well as control and oversight was emphasized by the confirmation of one Aidar commander responsible for Severodonetsk and Rubizhne in Luhansk that “the battalion used a ‘simplified’ procedure for detentions and indicated that the battalion indeed had its own facility in the Severodonetsk area for holding detainees. He acknowledged that there could be instances of beating during arrest, confirmed that detainees were blindfolded throughout the detention” (Amnesty International 2014, 6; for a comparable account of the Tornado company, see Media Initiative Group for Human Rights 2017).

Early in the war, the taking of prisoners was not centralized. Units that took prisoners often sought to keep them in case their own fighters were captured by the enemy and would need to be exchanged. Nor is it a secret that several arrestees were tortured. While claiming that his battalion only arrested separatists and Russian citizen who acted as artillery spotters (information about volunteers’ positions was allegedly found in their mobile phones), one Aidar volunteer admitted torturing a Russian captive before handing him over to SBU counterintelligence (VICE News 2014b). It appears that mobile phones often offered the main evidence of guilt. The wrong date and time alone raised suspicion. Finding cryptic messages like “abracadabra” or sequences of numbers was enough to prove the bearer had hostile intentions.

From the volunteers’ perspective, the challenge of winning against an elusive enemy was exacerbated by the unclear status of the war that never was. As several of them wondered, what does one do to prisoners of war in a situation that falls short of

war, and where the Geneva Convention did not apply? Did this mean that prisoners were not of war? And if the situation was war, then surely peacetime laws had ceased to apply? Some of these points emerged in the trial of the Tornado company members – who, despite working as a special police unit, lacked training on their legal rights and responsibilities (Media Initiative Group for Human Rights 2017).

This ambiguity led to a situation where volunteers' actions remained within the sphere of peacetime law during times of violent conflict. In an ambiguous war, even the armed forces lacked the legal authority to detain people. According to Sergey, the army got into trouble for doing so. To solve the problem the military could ask volunteers registered as police to conduct arrests. In practice, even photos of detainees in separatist uniforms did not suffice as evidence in courts. Confessions did, however. In this paradoxical situation, the only solution appeared “hard treatment”, or torture (for an example, see Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2016, 20). This was especially the case as the SBU on occasion suggested it lacked the capacity to receive and “process” prisoners. The task then fell to volunteer battalions. One volunteer dryly noted that pretty much every group of volunteers had their own torture specialist. He called theirs “a butcher.”

Alpha, a foreign volunteer, described meeting with a separatist collaborator arrested by his battalion in the spring of 2015. Aside from being intimidated, the arrestee bore no marks of physical violence. As several volunteers pointed out, captured separatists were often so afraid of harsh treatment by volunteer battalions that the threat alone was enough for them to cooperate. After a short interrogation, the collaborator was transferred to police custody. Within 24 hours he had been released and was guiding artillery fire to Alpha's position. Weak state capacity and political reliability may again have strengthened the view that the volunteers had to take matters into their own hands if they wanted something to be done. Simultaneously, the volunteers expected brutal treatment if captured by separatists – torture at best and execution at worst. After returning home, several interviewees like Sergey spoke of

recurring nightmares where they found themselves running out of ammunition and facing capture at the front lines. Like among separatists (Matveeva 2018, 125), it was common to save a bullet or a grenade to prevent this from happening.

According to Valentyn Nalyvaichenko, the head of the SBU, by June 2015, over 2,500 “terrorists and separatists” were “seized and arrested”, out of which 1,500 were exchanged for the “release 2,400 Ukrainian citizens” (quoted in Hladka et al. 2017, 13). Three years later, the number of returned Ukrainian “prisoners of war” had increased to 3,224 (UNIAN 2018b). From the start of the conflict, detainees were valued as hostages. The precedent was formed by Vyacheslav Ponomarev, who in April 2014 captured and for two months replaced Neli Shtepa, the mayor of Sloviansk. As Ponomarev explained in an interview, “We need hostages. We need a bargaining card, you understand” (Pieniążek 2017). Arrests of journalists and other people, especially those deemed politically unreliable, followed. At the end of April, the Ukrainian government spoke of about 40 hostages held in Sloviansk. Political figures had reason to be afraid after the tortured and mutilated body of a local politician was found in a forest on April 22. When the Ukrainian authorities tried to make an arrest related to this case, they in turn were captured by separatists. Humiliated and photographed, they were exchanged on May 7 by Ponomarev for Gubarev, his fellow “people’s governor” of the Donetsk oblast who had been arrested by the SBU in March (Pieniążek 2017, 63–67). The trade of hostages soon became commonplace. After one side captured someone, the other raced to find someone they could arrest in order to exchange captives. These practices were so common that in discussions with volunteers, the term “prisoner” was often used interchangeably with “hostage.” They could provide information about the enemy, be traded for own captives, sold for money or – as happened at least on the separatist side – mutilated (Matveeva 2018, 140–41).

The issue of hostages serves as proof of the inherently political nature of the conflict in a way that did not fit the narrow military view of war; the hostage issue also demonstrates how the con-

flict became a profitable business. Different kinds of captives had different worth. As in all wars, treatment of the enemy to some extent reflected how one wanted to be treated. Separatists valued Ukrainian soldiers more than volunteers. On the one hand, soldiers were viewed as mere functionaries who bore no ill will toward separatists. On the other, Aleksandr envisaged that the army was also feared because it was much more powerful than the volunteer battalions. The volunteer battalions in turn were dehumanized. Captured volunteers could expect harsh treatment, including torture and summary killing. Overall, it was much more difficult to win their release. For those on the government side, Russian soldiers were more “expensive” than local separatists. Unlike local separatists, the capture of Russians had political significance, as this served as evidence of direct Russian participation in the hostilities.

Early in the war, decisions about the treatment of prisoners were made on the local level. When Olexa’s squad captured 14 prisoners – 2 Ukrainians and 12 Russians – some wanted to execute them. Ultimately, one of his squad members successfully argued that they should instead be kept as hostages to free Ukrainians captured by separatists. These prisoners were subsequently handed over to the SBU. According to Roman’s observations on the front lines, those who managed to capture a separatist could put them in a hole, call separatists, and arrange an exchange of their hostage for those held by the opponent. This practice even extended to the military. One Ukrainian special forces unit managed to capture four separatists, but at the cost of five of its soldiers captured by the separatists. After some bargaining, the discrepancy was made up with 20 Glock knives.

As Sergey put it in his typically dispassionate way, “our war by Ukrainian law is full of illegal things.” One of these was how kidnapping became a business, especially for separatists (Wilson 2014, 135). According to one volunteer informant, there was an SBU officer on the government side who specialized in these operations. The officer could order a group of volunteers to effectively kidnap people from separatist-held areas, who were

exchanged not only for other hostages but also for ransom. The informant who was a member of this group was very critical of the practice, which he equated to kidnapping Ukrainian citizens. Officially, the people targeted had been identified as artillery spotters. After receiving information about targets, the group removed any identifying badges, donned balaclavas, and in some cases spoke Russian to deceive the targets about their identities. According to this informant, other volunteer battalions that engaged in similar activities were less smart and more recognizable. At least one of the victims of this group tried to bring his case to the police, but without any concrete result. The volunteer participated in a handful of these operations, before they ended once the officer in charge was assassinated. Considering he was accused of turning the arrests into a business, it is plausible to assume that not only separatists and Russian officials sought to have him killed. In late 2019 prisoners became bargaining chips even on the strategic level as President Zelensky negotiated a prisoner exchange as one of the “first steps to stop the war.”

Finally, even dead bodies had value. Corpses of the dead – both civilian and combatant – were exchanged across the front lines. Here was another human cost of war: the uncertainty as to whether loved ones were alive or not. Civilian volunteers organized many of these efforts, the importance of which became clear with Anna and the fate of her brother’s body after he had died in combat. In this particular case the local separatist commander told the volunteer he met with that she could leave with the bodies immediately in exchange for sex. It is not clear whether he was serious or not, but the renegotiation of the terms of exchange meant that it took time to get the body back to the government-controlled side.

The War that Was

On August 24, Kyiv witnessed a military parade organized to celebrate Ukraine’s independence from the Soviet Union. Poroshenko, who was preparing to meet Putin in Minsk two days later to discuss a ceasefire, intended the parade as a show of force, featur-

ing 1,500 soldiers and dozens of vehicles. Though Poroshenko claimed that everything at the parade would be sent to Donbas (Kim 2014), a group of Aidar volunteers questioned the parade's purpose altogether. Denied participation in the parade, they criticized it as "unnecessary": during an ongoing war, they wanted the soldiers and equipment to help fight in the east instead of strutting in the capital (VICE News 2014b).

It may have been too late to save the day. As suggested by Girkin, the arrival of Russian "vacationers" in early August turned the tables. According to Matveeva, volunteers, weapons, fuel, and medical supplies started to arrive during the spring, tanks and armored vehicles in mid-June, and heavy weapons by July. During the summer, training camps for separatist fighters were opened in Rostov. In August, Russians were effectively coordinating separatist forces according to a newly devised military strategy (Matveeva 2018, 126–27, 150–51, 164). As noted earlier, we do not yet know the full extent of Russian influence behind the unrest. On August 15, Alexander Zakharchenko, the separatist premier of the DPR, nevertheless claimed that his forces had been bolstered by 1,200 fighters trained in Russia for four months. He also spoke of reserves of 150 armored vehicles, including 30 tanks (Antimaidan Novorossiia 2014). With increasing state participation on both sides, the war conventionalized into a war that was, with July and August witnessing the heaviest fighting of the war in Donbas. This military interpretation of the war, for instance expressed by Aleksandr, saw it waged not by irregular bands and invisible enemies, but by two qualified armies. Without guerrillas or "police operations" the escalation of the conflict made many of the ambiguities that had haunted volunteer combatants disappear.

Perhaps up to 4,000 Russian regular units participated in the main engagement of the war in Ilovaisk (Kofman et al. 2017, 44), where Ukrainian forces consisting predominantly of volunteers had become encircled by the time of the Independence Day parade. Ilovaisk is a strategically important transport hub that connects Donetsk with Russia. The Ukrainian side suffered from poor intelligence, hasty planning, and insufficient forces.

Lack of trust further hindered coordination. As several volunteers explained, support promised by the armed forces never arrived; nor did the additional volunteer battalions ordered show up (Hladka et al. 2017, 148–58). Once encircled, multiple sources claim that withdrawal through a “green corridor” was agreed upon between Ukrainians and Russians. The agreement saw that Ukrainians should leave behind their equipment, which they refused to do. Other accounts indicate that this agreement only concerned Ukrainian regulars, but not the volunteer battalions (Hladka et al. 2017, 151; Kim 2014). Hated by their enemies, who saw them as unrelenting and aggressive (Matveeva 2018), it is understandable that volunteer battalion fighters viewed surrender as risky. As the Ukrainian columns began withdrawing as originally planned, they came under devastating fire.

Ilovaisk was a catastrophe for the combined Ukrainian forces, and especially the volunteer battalions. Many officials explained this failure by the volunteer forces’ inability to cope against Russian regulars. The official tally of casualties – 366 killed, 429 wounded, 128 captured, and 158 missing (Prosecutor General’s Office of Ukraine 2017) – was higher than had been suffered in the war up to Ilovaisk. Like other official figures, even these excluded volunteers. Making matters worse, according to a government commission on Ilovaisk, Ukraine “lost its most battle-hardened brigades and about 30% of all tanks, 74% of troop carriers, 93% of all howitzers, 60% of all self-propelled artillery vehicles and 67% of multiple rocket systems” (Malyarenko and Galbreath 2016, 120). Morale plummeted due to the loss of fighters, material, and faith in command. Expecting a full-scale Russian invasion, Ukrainian forces began to dig defensive positions. Poroshenko’s government immediately sued for ceasefire.

The Minsk Protocol-initiated a ceasefire on September 4–5 had limited effect. As one top-level Ukrainian diplomat explained, several European allies warned the Ukrainian government that the protocol was a trap: by signing the document, Ukraine would accept the Russian framing of events. According to this source, the Ukrainian government pushed these countries to accept the

agreement – although it is fair to note that the same countries had earlier advised Ukraine to de-escalate the situation, lest it turn into war (Klimkin 2019). Many Ukrainian nationalists saw the Minsk Protocol as nothing short of treason, proving that Poroshenko was a traitor. These feelings were only strengthened as the government secretly passed a law on September 16 that granted amnesty to separatists and provided greater autonomy to eastern Ukraine (BBC News 2014e). After bleeding and dying to prevent the formation of separatist enclaves that could act as proxies for Russian interests, volunteers viewed allowing the separatists to choose their own leaders and set up their own police forces beyond government control as a failure. Too much suffering had been endured and too many sacrifices made to allow this.

With little trust between the parties and with the core issues of the conflict remaining unresolved, combatants on both sides believed their opponents simply used the truce to prepare for the next offensive. Russia nevertheless officially maintained that the conflict could only be resolved through implementation of the vaguely worded protocol – which bound both Ukraine and separatists. Following the ceasefire agreement, separatist territorial conquest would only increase Russian expenditure. The subsequent sieges of Ukrainian-held Donetsk and Luhansk airports, and especially the next major battle at Debaltseve, were undertaken in order to shorten the front line and ease separatist logistics.

Debaltseve was another transport hub sandwiched between territory controlled by the DPR and LPR, and the easternmost area controlled by Ukraine. As separatist forces attacked the Ukrainian defenders of Debaltseve on January 22, a bus stop was shelled in the city of Donetsk, killing eight civilians. On laying a wreath at the site of the attack, Zakharchenko declared an offensive against Mariupol where no prisoners would be taken as “the best possible monument to all our dead” (quoted in RFE/RL 2015). The immediate revenge came two days later after Russia deployed two rocket artillery batteries to separatist-controlled areas across the border. They joined separatist batteries and opened fire on

Mariupol in the morning of January 24. The hail of rockets killed 30 and wounded over 90. The Russian MoD also seems to have been worried about discovery by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), which prompted the hasty withdrawal of the Russian units back to Russia (Bellingcat 2018a). The attack constituted a mere show of strength, possibly because Russia prioritized the battle of Debaltseve.

Separatist forces increasingly encircled Debaltseve, cutting off both the remaining civilians and the Ukrainian forces. Fighting continued during the next round of Minsk negotiations, resulting in a new ceasefire signed on February 12. Though the ceasefire began at midnight February 15, fighting continued as both sides sought to improve their positions. The encircled Ukrainian forces began to retreat three days later, leaving equipment and heavy weapons to separatists. Like at Ilovaisk, they soon came under decimating fire.

The Ukrainian government, desperately holding territory against ever-greater odds, sought to downplay the casualties incurred in these clashes. Burzhua, for example, believed that Donetsk airport was held mainly for political reasons. The resolve of Ukrainian superhuman "cyborgs" against overwhelming force made great propaganda but came at a grave cost. Overall, he thought it was foolish to hold fast to territory that the opponent could easily encircle and subject to siege.

The concentration of separatist forces in Debaltseve nevertheless helped Ukrainians score a victory in Shyrokyne, from where separatists could shell Mariupol. Further Ukrainian offensives were thought futile. As several volunteers explained the situation after Ilovaisk, Russian military formations across the border made sure that when Ukrainians pushed too hard, the Russians simply pushed back. As a result, there was little the Ukrainians could do without external support that balanced the power discrepancy. Even the Ukrainian material capacity was exhausted, leaving the government and its military in a perilous situation. Poroshenko later said that at one point he was "down to one battalion," and

that “90% of the negotiations in Minsk were simply about halting fire” in 2015 (*Economist* 2017).

The battle of Debaltseve marked the end of the war of movement. While the defeats at the airports and Debaltseve were great, they were the result of long struggles rather than collapse, like in Ilovaisk six months earlier. This suggests that the Ukrainian forces had become stronger and better organized. Estimates suggest that their opponents included 3,500–6,500 Russian troops in August 2014, and approximately 9,000 by the last week of February 2015 (Sutyagin 2015, 4). Separatists nevertheless struggled to do more without overt Russian help, which was not forthcoming due to the reasonable expectation of Western intervention (Judah 2015, 170). By subscribing to the Minsk Protocol, Russia also recognized Ukrainian territorial integrity. In 2015 the separatists even officially reduced their territorial claims (Wilson 2016, 634–35). Both sides withdrew most heavy weapons from the front lines, or at least hid them as best as they could from OSCE observers. This served to limit escalation and the intensity of the war.

With belligerents digging in, the war began to resemble the trench warfare of the Western front in the First World War. Like a century earlier, the war in Donbas increasingly routinized and ritualized. Shots – typically artillery and sniper fire – were exchanged to vent frustration and keep opponents on the defensive rather than as a part of some greater strategy that promised an end, let alone a victory in the conflict. Mines and unexploded ordnance continued to pose threat to life and limb, both for belligerents and especially civilians. Both sides struggled to control force in order to prevent escalation of the steadily grinding conflict. As a result, the front lines became largely fixed. With the ceasefire providing respite from fighting, both sides focused on creation and control of force. The results were evident in June 2015 in Maryinka, where government forces countered an offensive by separatists frustrated by drawn-out negotiations. When Ukrainian forces in turn captured ground in the “gray zone” between warring parties, they described their successes as a “creeping offensive.” Such small tactical victories and the deaths of even single separatists were cel-

ebred. But aside from boosting ailing moral among the troops, they had little strategic importance. The next section investigates the importance of the volunteer battalions.

Use of Volunteer Force

Volunteers were not only a force that spearheaded offensives against separatists but also focused on keeping separatism in check in the territory they captured. Even after making gains at Ilovaisk, separatists controlled only half of the territory they had initially held. It is unlikely that the government side could have stopped the spread of separatism, let alone made such gains without the volunteer battalions. The volunteers benefited from civil society support, exemplified by the way one Ukrainian academic described how many of her colleagues could spend their evenings making camouflage nets early in the war in 2014. Bringing with them civilian knowledge and thinking, the decentralized volunteers also showed great capability for grassroots adaptation. Struggling with insufficient intelligence, for instance, volunteers acquired drones to alleviate the situation.

All the volunteers interviewed pointed out the absence of clear Ukrainian strategy and the crudeness of Russian use of force in Donbas that questioned ideas about new and seemingly smarter Russian “hybrid” strategies. On the Ukrainian side the initial strategy of containment and force mobilization was followed by the pincer-shaped summer offensive. This strategy failed as soon as Russia denied Ukrainian control of the border region through its use of cross-border indirect fire. This indirect fire caused many casualties and supported the subsequent separatist counterattack that culminated in the Battle of Ilovaisk. Both sides relied more on brute force than clever stratagems or novel nonmilitary means. In order to protect the veneer of deniability, Russia had to limit its overt intervention in the conflict. Even so, with more artillery, better intelligence, and greater number of more capable and better equipped soldiers, Russia could in time push the combined Ukrainian forces back when necessary.

It is good to keep in mind the small scale of the fighting early in the war. As mentioned above, casualty rates remained relatively low until Ilovaisk. For Kazhan the war was a historic moment that he could not miss – not the kind of horrible tragedy war is often described as. Buddha explained how the volunteer battalions reminded him of Cossacks, as they provided “a rare opportunity in our time to go back to history, [to] become history.” When it came to warfare, a common way to describe the overall atmosphere was to compare it with post-apocalyptic computer games like *Fallout* and *Stalker*. With the majority of combat outside urban areas, most landscape was largely still. Yet there were always people around. Just when one expected it the least, an old woman carrying water would appear from nowhere, or an old man would cycle past like there was no war. Armed people moved among the trees – or perhaps this was just a figment of the imagination?

Kazhan’s experience of the war appears by and large representative. In his telling, fighting bore little resemblance to that portrayed in movies. Because of advances in firepower, the regulative principle in this war was hiding. Technology – drones, optics, and radars that detected mobile phone signals – helped to some extent. Several volunteers were also exposed to text messages encouraging them to “stop fighting against the people of Donbas” and accusing them of being Nazis. Clearly, the opponent knew who the volunteers were and where they were located. The elevation of hiding nevertheless meant that killing became very difficult. The majority of casualties were not caused in eye-to-eye battles. Because people are not robots, they have an instinct for self-preservation. This instinct often manifested as fear and caused firefights to be fought blindly. As soon as someone shot, everyone began to shoot wherever they thought the opponent might be. During the year he spent in the war, Kazhan is only certain of twice seeing the enemy. He believed that every single opponent killed in this war required 1,000–10,000 bullets.

Frustration too added its toll. When asked what he felt was the most surprising thing about the war, Sergey answered that there was only one surprising thing: “war is boring. It’s *boring, boring*,

boring. [There is a] short time of interesting act[ion]. The rest is boring." Shooting – even at no particular target – became a way to decrease this boredom and to increase alertness. This, and likely fear, also explains Sergey's earlier narrative about the battle with the unarmed hedgehog. The hiding, the invisibility, and the distance of the enemy combined to make fighting some of the war an impersonal experience. And while Kazhan was afraid and felt his agency disappear because the opponent was trying to kill him, he understood the threat as a force of nature, not malignant intent. As Sviatoslav pointed out, others nevertheless took matters more personally.

Most volunteer battalion fighters only ever experienced combat a couple of times during the war. In this sense Kazhan's experience is representative. There were exceptions, however. One volunteer battalion fighter interviewed – a machine gunner – claimed a few dozen kills, the closest from a distance of no more than 5 meters. On one occasion he participated in a daring mission to destroy enemy armored vehicles in a built-up area. Even he nevertheless admitted that the vast majority of casualties in the war were caused by indirect fire, not small arms.

The ambiguous status of the battalions made them more flexible than regular army units. As Kazhan explained, in May 2014 the opportunities provided by the abstruse battalions were recognized by those frontline officers of the armed forces who sympathized with the volunteers and their aggressive ethos, but who could not take initiative without permission from above. With Kyiv seeking to de-escalate the situation after the ceasefire agreements, such orders were not forthcoming. Spotting good opportunities to act, the officers could contact Aidar. Not bound to the same extent to any chain of command, volunteer battalions could take offensive action against separatists on their own initiative. It was all the better if this resulted in a separatist counterattack, allowing the regular units to legitimately defend themselves. Provocation by volunteer battalions thus provided more flexibility while still allowing the frontline officers to deny responsibility for escalation and hostilities. Even if abhorred by some of the higher authorities,

volunteer battalions were therefore used as a flexible tool and a force multiplier. Local commanders discussed tactics with volunteers and advocated that they, for instance, flank separatists. After contact was established and the enemy engaged, the army would join in, pounding the separatists. And if higher-ups asked what had happened, local commanders could shrug and blame the volunteers. The volunteers simultaneously continued to carry out the “dirty work” of a war that never was, discussed in the section on “police operations” above.

These kinds of arrangements were not limited to early in the war but continued especially through Right Sector – the only volunteer group which refused incorporation into formal state structures. According to Buddha, his army unit was forbidden to shoot in an industrial zone but instead relied on a Right Sector unit stationed in the same area. Soldiers provided the volunteers either trophy guns or lent their own during operations. A reconnaissance platoon was occasionally subordinated to a Right Sector commander who had superior knowledge of the terrain. And when Right Sector went on the offensive, the soldiers provided supporting fire with machine guns and grenade launchers. It was not surprising that local commanders often had good relations with volunteers, coordinated operations, and helped each other when possible.

The Hospitaliers battalion offers another example of the continued importance of volunteers. Early in the war, the medical capabilities of the Ukrainian side were catastrophic. Without training or equipment, hemorrhage was a common yet often preventable cause of death. Recognizing this acute need, volunteers soon offered training and first aid kits to help with initial triage and care. Others went further and mobilized medical volunteer battalions to the front lines. While some of these battalions were staffed with medical professionals, the Hospitaliers accepted volunteers with limited or no previous medical training. Their continued operation on the front lines even after the Russian invasion in 2022 became an ongoing reminder of how the state continued to rely on volunteer support. Once again, the lack of equipment

and antiquated regulations that forbade the use of modern equipment hindered the state provision of a crucial frontline function.

While crucial early in the war, with time the importance of the volunteers diminished. As one Ukrainian soldier said of the volunteer battalions: "people need real heroes and beautiful stories. But you can't win the war by mere beautiful stories" (Chernyshev 2015). And as argued earlier with the "police operations," just like in all wars, behind the volunteers' heroic reputation also lay stories of an ugly kind.

The gradual decrease of the volunteer battalions' importance depended to large extent on material factors. For Clausewitz, the problem with people's war was that such forces could not mass, as they would be annihilated by better organized regular forces (Heuser 2002). While this effectively happened at Ilovaisk, the situation was different from the one Clausewitz pictured. Clausewitz expected people in arms to fight defensively against an occupier. The situation in Donbas was more complex, as the volunteer battalions fought offensively to recapture terrain from separatists, who at least at times enjoyed some support from the local population. As Russia increasingly deployed heavy equipment and regular forces, the volunteer battalions were effectively out-escalated. Or, as Dmitriy put it, "police couldn't have tanks or artil[l]ery," and hence could not continue to wage the war once it intensified. What had been possible before with small and aggressive forces would work no more. The conflict thus transformed from one of motivation and will to one of material and mass (Sanders 2017). After Debaltseve, labor replaced heroism, as digging trenches and constructing shelters outdid combat action. With the armed forces taking charge, the volunteer battalions were officially withdrawn from the front lines in April 2015. Police operations in turn ended with the end of the ATO and the beginning of the military-led Joint Forces Operation in April 2018.

The previous chapters have emphasized the importance of the political nature of the volunteer battalions. Aside from their political and military action, the volunteer battalions' reputation in the east alone served to escalate the conflict. In fact, many volun-

teers claimed this escalation was nothing less than their primary goal. None of the combatants interviewed mentioned minimum force, elsewhere deemed central for curbing escalation. As Alpha explained, the volunteers' use of force should be seen in context. Witnessing the actions of first the volunteers and then then the military up until 2017, he saw limited improvement in terms of leadership and training. The army was still hesitant to take risks, for instance when attempting to arrest separatists. This meant that risk was effectively transferred to the local population as the military resorted to overwhelming force, not least in the form of indirect fire. The result was "losing much support among a perhaps already skeptical local population."

A Protracted War

The war in Donbas was characterized by poor strategy, with belligerents relying on brute force to capture territory. In the spring of 2015, the belligerents – militarily undefeated and disinclined to commence new offensives – were unwilling to compromise politically. The war thus reached an equilibrium. Without a strategy to resolve the conflict, belligerents adapted to a war with no end in sight (Freedman 2019). Amidst more common artillery and sniper fire, even other kinds of force were used; both sides engaged in targeted killings, but with insufficient evidence it is difficult, if not impossible, to assign guilt. Separatists typically pinned culpability for the deaths of their leaders on Ukrainian secret services, whereas Ukrainian officials were quick to suggest that rivaling separatists or their masters in Moscow were to blame. On the government side, assassinations first and foremost concerned Chechen volunteers. According to some Ukrainian military observers it was nevertheless impossible to rule out that these assassinations concerned Chechen politics or other issues not directly connected to the war in Donbas.

While Ukraine was much stronger than the separatist people's republics, Russian backing of the separatists still made Ukraine the weaker belligerent. This power asymmetry made it diffi-

cult for Ukraine to win the war through attrition. With greater resources, Russia could replace losses more easily than Ukraine. The resulting equilibrium shifted attention toward exhaustion and the moral dimension of war. This strategy was seen to favor Ukraine (Freedman 2015). Physical attrition and psychological exhaustion are default strategies when other strategies fail, and the main victims of attrition and exhaustion are often civilians (Echevarria 2017, 42). Even if the intensity of the war decreased from its peak in 2014–15, perhaps six million people continued to reside in war-affected areas: two million in the government-controlled area, and four million in that controlled by the Russian-supported separatists.

The hope was that if Ukraine had a greater interest in winning the war, perhaps it could exhaust its opponents by demonstrating its readiness to suffer. Some Ukrainians even expressed the hope that Russia would disintegrate, and in so doing cease to threaten Ukraine. This appeared little more than wishful thinking. A strategy of exhaustion was always unlikely to resolve the conflict as long as Russia continued to back the separatists. When asked, officials in Kyiv commonly assumed that without Russian support, the separatist enclaves would fall within two weeks. But as long as this support continued, any Ukrainian offensive to change the status quo appeared a nonstarter.

In the meantime, the ceasefires and the withdrawal of heavy weapons from the 472-kilometer line of contact resulted not only in the limitation of violence but also the urgency of war. Prioritizing containing the conflict, Ukraine's Western allies saw little merit in risking further escalation. Apart from the limited economic sanctions, Russia largely succeeded in shielding its citizens from the war through censorship, denials, and reliance on mercenaries, professionals, and volunteers. Ukrainian democracy in turn posed significant problems for waging a protracted war. With the war nearly invisible in most parts of Ukraine, the Poroshenko government may be commended for successfully cauterizing the war from society in a way that also allowed international investment. As Anna explained, the fact that most Ukrainians could

continue their lives despite the ongoing war proved the success of the men and women defending the country. Poroshenko's success may nevertheless have cost him his second presidential term. With an increasingly distant and invisible war in the east, doubts over its utility grew. While all the informants interviewed who participated in the war voted for Poroshenko in the second round of the presidential elections on April 21, 2019, he received a mere 24.45 percent of all votes against Zelensky's 73.2 percent.

While the war was lauded for uniting Ukrainians (Pond 2017, 144), support for the ongoing conflict became divisive during the 2019 presidential elections. In a poll conducted three months into the presidency of Volodymyr Zelensky, 71.5 percent of Ukrainians felt a ceasefire constituted a priority (UNIAN 2019). While Zelensky had promised peace, he – like all the others who had suggested roadmaps to peace after 2015 (Miller 2017a) – found that it was difficult to establish due to resistance from both without and within. Commenting on the prospect of Zelensky acceding to holding elections in separatist-controlled areas in October 2019, one civil society reformer explained that “peace is not what’s needed the most now.” At stake from the beginning of the war had been that autonomy of any region of Ukraine would unravel Ukrainian statehood. As the reformer put it, giving the now separatist-controlled areas autonomy and unparalleled say in national legislation would lead to a situation where they were “de facto controlled by Putin, funded by Ukrainian taxpayers, [and] largely influencing Ukrainian politics.” All things considered, he saw that the threat of this kind of peace was greater than the cost of continuing war; it was best “to stay fucking put.” Many thus equated any move toward this kind of peace agreement to capitulation and surrender. Crossing these kinds of “red lines” would, according to a number of Ukrainian civil society organizations, “lead to political instability in our country and the deterioration of international relations” (Euromaidan Press 2019). As already noted, it was not uncommon to interpret this domestic political instability as a new revolution.

From the Ukrainian perspective, the Minsk agreements had been signed under duress after the defeats at Ilovaisk and Debal-

tseve. Implementing the agreements would have equated to Russian undermining of Ukrainian sovereignty. The Ukrainian position had since strengthened, and was poised to strengthen further with time. This created incentives for Ukraine to continue the low-intensity war (Sanders and Tuck 2020, 25–26, 30). The official policy of Western countries was that the Minsk agreements should be implemented. Yet considering that their implementation threatened Ukrainian sovereignty, this was not forthcoming. In a diplomatic impasse and in the absence of a military solution, some foreign diplomats and Ukrainians argued that Ukraine should focus on political reforms. Economic and political reforms would have contributed to greater prosperity, but also to a feeling that Ukraine was worth belonging to and risking life and limb for. This reflected Burzhua's view that Ukraine should strive to become the opposite of the increasingly authoritarian and illiberal Russia. This recalled the emphasis on the internal cohesion and external reputation formulated by George Kennan (1947) in his advocacy of the containment of the Soviet Union at the outset of the Cold War.

Ukraine could also have used reforms to win over "hearts and minds" of those who remained under separatist control through offering a better future. Reforms, however, required resources and painful decisions. While many reforms had been pushed through after the Maidan, this was not enough. In particular, initiatives toward the government-controlled Donbas were wanting. The consequences became clear in some volunteer informants' descriptions of how many civilians in government-controlled areas close to the front lines loathed the government. Contact with Ukrainians living in separatist-controlled areas suggested that support for separatists remained at least as divided. Despite the evidence like the poll results published in October 2019 that showed 80.5 percent of the people living in the occupied areas did not want to rejoin Ukraine (Kasianenko 2020), some of those interviewed continued to maintain the official line, and saw separatists as Russian proxies, and the civilians in what are officially known as "non-government-controlled areas" as Russian

hostages. With little agency, they were perceived to possess little power to determine their fates. A few informants nevertheless expressed a nagging doubt about genuine support for separatism in Donbas. And the longer the separation lasted, the greater the differences between the people in Donbas and the rest of Ukraine were expected to become.

In addition to resistance from within, Russia did little to help Zelensky. While the Russian involvement and support for the separatists was obvious to all parties, the Minsk agreements neither mentioned Russia nor demanded anything from the country when it came to their implementation. To make matters worse, the ambiguous nature of the agreement meant that the phrasing of implementing the accords was interpreted differently by Ukraine and Russia. Little progress was achieved. While the intensity of the war greatly decreased, even a ceasefire remained unattainable. Ultimately, neither Putin nor Zelensky were willing to risk the potentially heavy political costs associated with compromise. Without a compromise, the war continued (Sanders and Tuck 2020, 32–33; see also Arel and Driscoll 2023; Åtland 2020).

The problem was that while Ukraine learned to live with the status quo, Russian dissatisfaction with it grew over time. In 2014 Russia had sought to gain much with little by destabilizing Ukraine to extract political concessions from the new post-Maidan rulers in Kyiv. This opportunistic strategy ran aground because Russia had overestimated the support for separatism in eastern Ukraine and underestimated the resistance in the rest of Ukraine. While the continued war made Ukrainian membership of the European Union and NATO a distant prospect, the Russian aggression had nevertheless pushed Ukraine onto a trajectory toward the West. What little remained of Russian influence depended on the implementation of the Minsk agreements (Kofman et al. 2017, 70–71). In Anna Matveeva's account, Moscow kept the lawless and corrupt separatist entities afloat financially, but never attempted to make them viable as it was hoped that Ukraine would pay for reconstruction after the implementation of the accords. Poroshenko's blockade in 2017 that was instigated by volunteers caused sepa-

ratists to rely more on trading with Russia. The Russian decision to begin granting passports to inhabitants of the DPR and LPR in 2019 also allowed them to freely migrate to Russia. Kyiv's decision to restrict cross-border traffic because of COVID-19 cut most social interaction between Ukraine and the people's republics. All this threatened the viability of the entities, both as socio-economic and political units as well as means Russia could employ to regain the political leverage it had lost in Ukraine in 2014. When Russian decision-makers increasingly began to perceive the Minsk agreements and discussions with Kyiv as a dead end in 2021, they sought to further integrate the people's republics into Russia (Matveeva 2022). Russia finally dealt a death blow to the Minsk agreements on February 21, 2022, when it recognized the DPR and LPR as independent states.

The Russian decision to invade Ukraine three days later can in part be explained as a failure of Russian strategy in respect of Ukraine since November 2013, when it blackmailed Yanukovich to abandon the association agreement negotiations with the European Union. It was Russian action that pushed Ukraine onto a westward trajectory. Lacking other means to rectify the situation Russian decision-makers had caused with their opportunistic strategy over the years, in 2022 Russia neglected the Ukrainian spirit of resistance and resorted to the largest use of force in Europe since the Second World War.

CHAPTER 7

Creation, Control, and Use of Force in the 2022 War

The decision of Vladimir Putin – as the decision must ultimately have been in an increasingly autocratic Russia – to invade Ukraine in February 2022 must be understood to follow the eight years of opportunistic Russian strategy in respect of its neighbor. While the quick decision to invade and annex Crimea had been successful, similar positive outcomes did not follow in subsequent Russian operations in Donbas. There the war dragged on for years, with little more benefit for Russia than the prospect of keeping Ukraine out of the European Union and NATO because of an unresolved territorial conflict. These gains came with a cost in Ukraine, where Russia was increasingly perceived with hostility. Views of Russia as a threat also strengthened elsewhere in Europe.

This chapter begins with an investigation of the reasons why Russia escalated the war in Donbas into a full-scale invasion in February 2022. The rest of the chapter then applies the framework of creation, control, and use of force to investigate the Russian invasion from February 2022 until October 2023. The surprising result is that Russia appears to have struggled with many of the issues Ukraine tackled in 2014–15. This suggests that the Ukrainian Spirit of 2014 has endured, now manifested as a spirit of Ukrainian resistance, strengthened to a nationwide phenomenon because of the invasion (Onuch and Hale 2022; Wilson 2023). Even further, Ukrainian military reforms appear to have been more successful than previously thought. That said, there are some indications that volunteers played an important part in

saving Ukraine again in the first days and weeks of the war. Volunteers nevertheless also played into the Russian propaganda, where volunteer “nationalist battalions” like Azov were used to justify the Russian invasion.

The 2022 invasion additionally raised the question of who exactly constituted a volunteer. This was brought up by several former volunteer battalion fighters, who rather described themselves as “veterans” or “professionals,” especially if they had served in the military or state security services. While volunteers early on were those who sought to join the war of their own volition, the growing state control and top-down mobilization of force narrowed the opportunities for volunteering.

Why Did Russia Invade in 2022?

Why did Putin then decide to drastically escalate the war in Ukraine with his invasion in February 2022, which he claimed was “to protect” people in Donbas? Three immediate explanations emerge: resolving his conflict with Ukraine once and for all, the affirmation of Russia’s international status as a great power, and Russian domestic politics.

Beginning with resolving the unfinished business with Ukraine, it remains unclear whether Putin really believes that Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians constitute a single people – and as a consequence, that Ukraine is not a “real” country and that Ukrainians who “refuse to admit they are Russians” are Nazis (Hill and Stent 2022, 113–14). Russia had nevertheless become a hostage of its own nation-building projects in the so-called people’s republics. Initially, the Russian-curated processes were vague about “the people” of Donbas for the sake of enabling their reintegration into Ukraine. In 2021 the people in Donbas began to be portrayed as Russians, their goal as returning to the Russian sphere (Kiryukhin 2023).

After subjugating the Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko in 2020 after mass protests erupted amid allegations of widespread electoral fraud, Russian attention shifted to

Ukraine. Hopes of a diplomatic solution had faded after Zelensky refused to make concessions about Crimea and Donbas. Despite Russian attempts, these occupied areas were not internationally recognized. Neither had they become a Trojan horse Russia could use to exert a veto right in Ukrainian domestic and foreign policy. While Russia never really invested in the reconstruction of Donbas, the economic strain of these increasingly depopulating regions without any obvious strategic value for regaining influence in Ukrainian affairs was considerable.

Ultimately, the decision to invade Ukraine can be interpreted as Russian weakness. Despite all the talk in Russia and especially abroad about Russian strategies of “hybrid” warfare, Russia had to rely on blunt military means to obstruct Ukraine’s path toward the West – a trajectory Russian opportunism in 2013–14 had launched Ukraine onto.

Secondly, on a higher level of analysis, a quick and successful invasion of Ukraine could have served as a means of affirming Russia’s international status as a great power. The one hundredth anniversary of the formation of the Soviet Union was in December 2022, a reminder of the previous Russian rise to superpower status on a par with the United States and China. Perhaps a Russian demonstration of its military might would have deterred the West from further NATO expansion as demanded by Russia in December 2021. Tensions in Europe would in any case have increased.

Domestic politics offer the final explanation for Putin’s decision to invade Ukraine. Putin lacked any apparent heir to his presidency and was facing elections in March 2024. After his popularity skyrocketed following the invasion and annexation of Crimea in 2014, he may have reasonably expected the same to happen with a swift and decisive “special military operation” (SMO) in Ukraine (Greene and Robertson 2022). It is also possible that Russian elites perceived the democratization of Ukraine as a threat. If democracy was possible in Ukraine, then why not in Russia (Gessen 2018)?

War is nevertheless always a gamble. A limited operation conducted by the Russian military against Ukraine that did not inter-

fere much with Russian society might have been welcomed by Russians (Bækken 2021). A large-scale war, on the other hand, would almost inevitably affect large swathes of society and thus break the Russian social contract where the elite expected society to be apathetic about politics in exchange for being able to enjoy improving welfare. Domestic political costs thus explain why Putin refrained from calling the war a war, and why after initial losses he dithered over mobilizing new forces until September, long after it had become clear that Russia would not achieve its original objectives through a more limited war.

To be fair, with the benefit of hindsight, everyone was to an extent surprised with the Russian invasion and its immediate aftermath. It appears that both Ukraine and Europe were surprised if not by the invasion itself, then at least by its scale. As a result, Ukraine failed to mobilize its forces (Harris et al. 2022). Secondly, after the invasion, it was not just Russia but even some observers in the United States and Europe that expected Kyiv to fall to the invading forces within a few days. This underestimation of Ukraine and Ukrainians warrants an amendment of Sun Tzu's (2012, 12) famous maxim about the importance of knowing your enemy and yourself as well as understanding your friends. It appeared that it was not only Russians but also Ukraine's allies who had neglected the study of Ukraine after 2014. Thirdly, pundits and policymakers outside Ukraine had overestimated Russian military capability (Renz 2023). As with those of their Ukrainian counterparts, even the Russian capabilities could only be judged when first put to use (Dalsjö, Jonsson, and Norberg 2022). And when used, military power must be considered in relation to that of the opponent – in this case Ukraine. Finally, as Ukrainians exhausted Russian plans, the hope of presenting the United States and Europe with a *fait accompli* failed. Russia had likely hoped to avoid any, or at least a strong, response from the West. It had amassed a war chest of \$650 billion that would be used to weather economic sanctions – which were in any case expected to be weak due to European dependency on Russian energy. Russia was surprised when it was almost immediately targeted with

unprecedented sanctions, had over 1,000 international companies promise to leave its markets, and saw Ukraine provided with the means to continue defending itself. All this deepened the imbalance between the high Russian aims and the means used to pursue them.

Creation of Force

The Russian hope seems to have been a quick victory in a limited manner that would have few adverse effects on Russian society. Here Russia could rely on the sheer size of its military and especially its material superiority compared to Ukraine. The Ukrainian resistance, however, extinguished these hopes during the first days of the invasion. After Russia refused to admit defeat, the war became protracted and expanded.

Even if Ukraine had not mobilized its forces before the invasion, it could draw on an estimated 400,000–500,000 combat veterans, including those who had served in the volunteer battalions. Ukrainian decision-makers had made some small – many would claim inadequate – efforts toward organizing the territorial defense. Luckily, the volunteer battalions served as an example of what motivated volunteers could achieve. The armed forces' experience with them also offered lessons for dealing with volunteers through integration, and the volunteers a model of national resistance. Within two days of the invasion, 50,000 Ukrainians had joined the territorial defense. By May 2022 that number had more than doubled to 110,000, alongside 700 volunteer organizations comprising around 70,000 people (ArmyINFORM 2022).

Despite simplified joining procedures, only a few of the volunteers describe a smooth mobilization. Sergey was woken up by a call from his commander at 5 a.m. on the day of the invasion. Two hours later he had joined his unit, which was already heading to meet invading tanks with anti-tank guided missiles. Meanwhile, Buddha – the veteran who had served in the ATO as a conscript – described how some veterans were called by their former units for refresher training before the Russian invasion. After the inva-

sion there were two kinds of enlistment centers: the army ones for those with past military service and the territorial defense for those without. Buddha and other veterans who approached the latter were sent to the army centers – which in several cases turned them down as there were no vacancies in their assigned units. Buddha's solution was to move to another region, register himself as an internally displaced person and then wait for three weeks before a new unit could mobilize him. Some others could just call their old buddies and join their units without formal processes.

Those like Kazhan who lacked official military experience mobilized to territorial defense to meet the invasion. Others like Burzhua who had reason to believe that they would not pass medical tests did not even try to join the lines at enlistment centers. They had been expecting a large-scale invasion since 2015 and built and maintained networks with others with shared determination both online and offline. After the invasion they formed, if not "pals' battalions," then "pals' squads" of people not necessarily united by their socio-economic background or political views, but rather by their experiences from different volunteer battalions in 2014–15 and a determination to defend Ukraine from Russia. Sergey stands out as he mobilized together with "the old crew" consisting of his comrades from the Donbas war, and then the special police.

Many early volunteers had packed their gear long before the Russian tanks crossed the border in the early hours of February 24. They came with their own small arms, helmets, vests, and armor plates, but also initiated crowdfunding efforts to procure vehicles and equipment, often on social media. When provided with anti-tank weapons, the volunteers helped professional soldiers stop approaching Russian columns. Ukrainian authorities also began to hastily provide assault rifles to citizens to discourage Ukrainian elites from collaborating with the invaders and to raise the cost of Russian occupation. Most male Ukrainians aged 18–60 were subjected to a general mobilization and banned from leaving the country. As several said, the fact that they had nowhere to run to only increased their motivation to fight. And when their

families left, victory became the only way for them to reunite with their nearest and dearest.

The force strength of the Ukrainian military multiplied in quick order. Especially in the early days after the invasion, the depth and breadth of the Ukrainian volunteer spirit gave a huge morale boost to the Ukrainian side. Many volunteers claim that they only began to trust Zelensky on the day of the invasion when he did not run but stayed to lead the defense of Ukraine. Even when the situation looked dire and when outside states were still gauging whether Kyiv would stand long enough for them to begin supplying Ukrainians with military means, there were many more willing to take to arms than there were arms and means to supply them. Sergey's one battalion soon swelled to three, as every member came with two other volunteers.

While cohesion was high, the state could nevertheless only provide the bare minimum of equipment to volunteers – often just assault rifles from the 1960s or 1970s and perhaps four clips of ammunition. The remaining kit the volunteers had to find and finance on their own, or through civilian volunteers. The outcome was uneven. Just like in 2014, at least one territorial defense group in Kyiv operated a Maxim gun first introduced in 1910, while units close to Lviv possessed expensive night vision equipment not always available to frontline units. Early in the war some volunteer units appeared more self-sufficient than their military equivalents, who depended on centralized logistics. A year into the war many military units had established long-standing ties with volunteers, who supported only these units. With centralized logistics and private purchases from salaries, military units' supply became supreme.

To remedy logistics issues, a war economy based on barter became widespread. Items – including both trophies captured from Russians and varied military assistance from abroad – were traded according to need, and without involving money. Sergey called barter “our style of war.” Barter was an understandable solution to a potluck logistical situation, which in particular affected volunteer units who had to rely on trophies.

General mobilization was also criticized overall as a clumsy relic from Soviet times. Even mobilizing authorities told some Ukrainians that without previous military experience they would better serve Ukraine by focusing on business and supporting the armed forces financially. Zelensky's early decision to increase the average military salary sevenfold to 100,000 hryvnia (around \$2,700) per month was meant to show society's support for those defending it. Within a year, the increase was described as unsustainable populism after salaries threatened to consume half of Ukraine's budget. In February 2023 the government cut bonuses for "combat tasks," but this caused outrage. In late June parliament reinstated the payments, but without addressing how they would be funded (Morenets 2023).

Volunteers again surprised with their high motivation. Like in 2014–15, they also came with demands. They criticized *sovok* and wanted looser discipline and opportunities for mission command. Yet, as their name suggests, the territorial defense units were originally meant to free up regular formations from protecting critical infrastructure and maintaining civilian order. Like militia in other wars, many volunteered primarily to defend their own homes. As a military spokesperson (quoted in Ponomarenko 2022) promised in January 2022, territorial defense "personnel will serve near their homes and essentially defend their hometowns." The role of the territorial defense nevertheless soon expanded. As Russian forces retreated from the Kyiv region in March and April to refocus their efforts on Donbas, territorial defense units followed. Initially, the territorial defense formed "a second line" behind regular forces. With the Ukrainian casualties mounting during the summer, territorial defense was increasingly deployed to plug holes in the front lines. Territorial defense was typically lightly equipped and possessed limited training. Toward the fall and winter, they would go on the offensive. This tested the morale of troops who had initially signed up for local tasks. Aside from territorial defense, instructions were provided for resisting occupation through partisan warfare. While Ukraine and some of its supporters continued to emphasize partisan action in occupied areas, it remains unclear

to what extent these actions were in fact conducted by Ukrainian special forces, not volunteers. Despite some initial assessments, no insurgencies were witnessed in Russian-occupied areas.

Within a year Ukraine had exhausted its supply of volunteers. Like their enemies in Russia, they too ultimately resorted to mobilizing new forces from the streets. Some who expected to be drafted “volunteered” to units they hoped were better in terms of leadership, equipment, and tasks, and hence improved chances of survival. Tosya even considered joining a volunteer unit herself to keep her better-earning and ailing husband safe as she expected her chances of deployment behind the frontlines to be greater than his. Ultimately, she decided against volunteering because this would have been unfair to drafted men, impossible to explain to their young child, and “just plain scary.”

In January 2023 Zelensky signed legislation that raised the maximum punishment for desertion to 12 years in prison. In April it was revealed that during the war the military draft chief in Odesa had bought property worth millions of euro in Spain. He was dismissed two months later (Tkach and Mazurenko 2023). Several frontline soldiers explained that corrupt officials demanded bribes from Ukrainians who did not want to be mobilized. This kind of profiteering was demoralizing, as was the government’s slowness in dealing with it. Corruption also raised doubts about the willingness of society to defend itself. Burzhua for one described his Facebook feed as a “non-stop obituary,” while others continued their lives as if no war existed. The resulting segregation between those fighting the war and those who sought to avoid doing so was even deemed to erode the military from within as those with the means to shield themselves from mobilization were replaced by the dregs. To make matters worse, by mid-2023 fresh Ukrainian troops continued to arrive at the front lines without even the most basic soldiering skills.

Finally, Ukraine called for foreign volunteers to join the newly established International Legion for the Defense of Ukraine, an umbrella for various units with foreigners in them. This time around, the process was government-led and volunteers were

screened more thoroughly to weed out those without immediate military value, although this seems to have mainly concerned those volunteering for the first time. The foreign volunteers interviewed who returned to the front lines in 2022 all bypassed this process as they joined their old units through personal contacts established during their earlier time in Ukraine. Aside from greater international media attention, Ukrainian informants described that foreign volunteers were typically operating together with Ukrainians. Aside from their nationality and the fact that they could leave when they wanted, they were considered little different from the rest of the forces on the Ukrainian side.

The bulk of the international support to Ukraine focused on assisting in its creation of force while obstructing that of Russia. After a few days of hesitation to see if Ukraine would survive the Russian onslaught, Western military assistance began to flow into Ukraine. The initial assistance focused on what were called “defensive” capabilities, especially easily transportable and usable anti-tank and anti-air weapons. Western economic sanctions against Russia sought to decrease European dependence on Russian energy and to cripple the Russian war machine through weakened economy and directed technology sanctions.

Ukraine’s foreign – mainly Western – backers wanted to support Ukraine but also to stay out of the war. From the perspective of Ukraine, these aims were to an extent contradictory. The second aim immediately resulted in so-called red lines which external backers were unwilling to cross in terms of military assistance. Facing a much stronger opponent, Ukraine relied on its foreign backers to counter greater Russian quantity with better quality – even if Ukraine obtained many more armored vehicles and quantities of ammunition and equipment as trophies from fleeing Russian forces than it did from its foreign backers.

Munitions – which Ukraine was unable to produce in anywhere near the amounts required by an industrial-scale war (Grant 2019) – offer one example. Already by May, Ukrainian artilleryists were running out of 152 mm rounds for its Soviet-made artillery systems. The solution was to provide Ukraine with Westernartil-

lery systems that used more readily available 155 mm rounds. The intensity of the war nevertheless wore out artillery barrels. On the most intense days of fighting, Ukrainians were reportedly firing up to 7,000 artillery rounds, or almost half of what the United States could produce in a month (Erlanger and Jakes 2022). Besides matériel, Ukrainian forces were increasingly provided intelligence and training to the extent that the Western strategy during the war could be described as keeping the Ukrainian administration afloat financially and Ukrainians warm and fed, while arming and reforming the Ukrainian military.

Russia, as noted, had sought a quick victory with limited means and without involving Russian society, which might find a protracted war unwelcome. The immediate effect was that the forces Russia could employ were contract soldiers and press-ganged fighters from the separatist DPR and LPR, as the conscripts who had participated in the invasion were reportedly withdrawn after their participation was criticized in Russia two weeks into the action (Reuters 2022). When Ukrainian resistance thwarted the initial Russian plans, Russian authorities increased salaries, tasked regional officials with mobilizing “volunteer battalions,” and outsourced warfare to mercenaries from Wagner and other companies. While the rumors that Russia sought to bring Syrian and Afghan fighters to Ukraine never materialized, Russian state-owned businesses like Gazprom and oligarchs mobilized their own fighting units to the war (Kossov 2023).

These measures did not solve the Russian lack of manpower. The mounting casualties had disproportionately affected elite units in the early stages of the war, and overall complicated reconstituting force. By July 2022 Russian forces were relying on their material superiority when fighting grinding battles of attrition in Luhansk – which it wrested from Ukrainian forces despite the latter’s dogged resistance. The cost of this victory was nevertheless so excruciating that no further gains were forthcoming. Superior manpower allowed Ukrainians to seize the initiative and go on the offensive, forcing the Russian forces to retreat. By September Putin’s announcement of escalating the war proved that his hopes

of a limited conflict had failed. The escalation came in the form of annexation of a further four regions of Ukraine and a “partial” mobilization in Russia. While most Russians had probably been able to continue their lives without being greatly affected by the conflict, the mobilization of approximately 300,000 new troops spelled an end to ignorance. The state had tried to ensure that the Russian population would not be interested in the war, but now the war became interested in them. The mobilized forces incurred a domestic political risk decision-makers had sought to avoid. A Band-Aid came in the form of the Wagner company, which was allowed to offer amnesty to Russian prisoners in exchange for six months of warfare in Ukraine.

The overestimation of the Russian military was hardly limited to insufficient manpower; the Russians also suffered from poor equipment, leadership, and morale. Beginning with equipment, the invading Russian forces were dogged with secrecy and optimistic assessments and had only been provided with a few days’ worth of food, water, and fuel. Even though Russia could draw on large stockpiles of arms and ammunition, it began to invest in producing more. The hope was that even with the excruciating costs of war, the Russian command economy would churn out more arms and ammunition than its liberal counterparts in the countries which supported Ukraine.

Russia nevertheless appeared to struggle with arming, equipping, and supplying its forces. Unprepared for a long war, inadequate Russian logistics limited their operations. Like the Ukrainian volunteer battalions in Donbas, Russian units felt neglected by their authorities. They too had to learn how to rely on crowdsourcing and civilian support to acquire equipment and necessary supplies. Lessons were sought and copied from Ukraine – where crowdsourcing internationalized to an unprecedented extent.

Whereas the Russian regulars had been able to outperform and outgun their Ukrainian adversaries in Ilovaik and Debaltseve, the situation now appeared reversed. Poor leadership, planning, and training led to high casualty rates. Whereas the volunteer bat-

talions and now the Ukrainian territorial defenders could draw on a strong ideology in the form of patriotism, the Russian forces struggled with morale. As Burzhua described, the Ukrainian forces who met Russian invaders in February 2022 were “ragtag.” Toward the end of 2022 they had developed into a much more professional force with superior determination. By mid-2023 several territorial defense units sought integration into the regular military in order to receive heavier equipment like armored vehicles. By then, many more of the initial Ukrainian volunteers had become casualties of war.

Russia in turned aimed to stabilize the front lines through the deployment of vast numbers of varyingly trained and equipped newly mobilized forces, prisoners, and contractors. Just as Ukraine received external material support, Russia too sought foreign partners to replenish its munitions and to bypass directed technology sanctions.

Control of Force

Within days of the invasion, the Russian military realized that effective coordination was impossible without control. The initial campaign plan saw four military districts focus on their own fronts, effectively independently waging their own wars in Ukraine (Ripley 2022). This failure to subordinate forces under a single command was suboptimal for a coherent campaign. The situation was only remedied in October 2022 when Sergey Surovikin, the commander of the Russian southern front, became the overall commander of the Russian forces in Ukraine. His task was nevertheless not helped by the way the Wagner company had acquired its own section of the front line in Donetsk, which its owner Yevgeny Prigozhin employed for his own domestic political agendas. Wagner had first emerged early in the war in Donbas but assumed a much greater role after the invasion in 2022 because of Russian issues with manpower. Wagner contributed greatly to the only significant Russian conquest during its spring offensive in 2023, the capture of the city of Bakhmut in May. In mid-June

2023 Prigozhin's brief mutiny in Russia laid bare the importance of control of force. To make matters worse, he had by then publicly questioned Putin's justification of the war. After cutting a deal with Putin, Prigozhin died in August 2023 in a suspicious airplane accident in Russia. Earlier in the spring, the extent of control and coordination of the Chechen forces of Ramzan Kadyrov had been similarly ambiguous. Even the Rosgvardia, the Russian National Guard, performed in a lackluster manner. By May 2022 at least 127 of its officers had been fired for refusing to follow orders in Ukraine – which in the absence of a declaration of war they felt might be illegal (Loh 2022). Following the mass mobilization of around 300,000 of its citizens in September–October and accusations of poor equipment and training, Russian authorities had to resort to arresting and charging those who criticized or refused to comply with orders to go to Ukraine. The arrests were often made in front of whole units to intimidate others to conform.

When Russian forces began to withdraw from the Kyiv region in late March 2022, a series of war crimes began to be uncovered in previously occupied areas, most famously in the city of Bucha. During the early days of the war, several Ukrainian journalists and civil society reformers told of being called by the SBU, who encouraged them to leave the country to avoid capture and execution by Russian occupants. Later reports tell of detained, tortured, and murdered volunteer battalion fighters and other veterans in occupied areas (Tondo and Mamo 2023). Terror raised the question of the extent to which such atrocities were strategic and planned to counter Ukrainian resistance, a result of failed control of force, or simply an inevitable consequence of the dehumanization of Ukrainians.

The terror caused national and international outcry. In Ukraine the war crimes fed into greater resistance. While the war was a horrible thing, the true face of the brutal Russian occupation was now deemed a worse alternative. Internationally, the red lines that had limited external assistance to Ukraine shifted considerably, making room for much more extensive support. And while some Ukrainians may have initially welcomed Russian forces, it is diffi-

cult to see how Russian terror contributed to winning “hearts and minds” in the areas they occupied.

Ukraine’s dependency on external support also meant that it had to be mindful of the control of force. As noted, these backers imagined red lines and expected Ukraine to refrain from crossing them. For instance, attacks on Russian territory were frowned upon. Despite repeated pleas, it took time before long-distance missiles and Western fighter planes were provided to Ukraine. When long-distance weapons did begin to be delivered, they came with the condition that they would not be used for cross-border attacks. Ultimately, from the start, the war was fought in the shadow of nuclear weapons. This meant that neither Ukraine’s foreign backers nor Russia wanted it to escalate from Ukraine. Ukrainians would thus constitute the main victims of the war.

Ukraine’s dependency on foreign assistance also meant that it was expected to uphold a moral high ground. While Ukraine’s situation was morally just and straightforward from the perspective of international law – it was defending itself against an illegal and increasingly brutal Russian invasion – it was far more vulnerable to accusations of war crimes than its Russian opponents. This was, for instance, visible in the outcry prompted by an Amnesty International (2022) press release, which some interpreted as placing potential Ukrainian war crimes on an equal footing with those committed by Russia. A just war had to be fought in a just manner. Ukraine had to be better than its opponent. In the end, upholding the moral high ground again depended on control of force.

Several interviewees criticized both Poroshenko and Zelensky for their failure to prepare the military and the Ukrainian people for major war. Ukraine’s ability to defend itself against the Russian onslaught nevertheless speaks volumes about the military reforms carried out after 2014. Ukraine had combined adaptability and NATO doctrine with mass within its financial limitations (Sanders 2023), at least on occasion going against the wishes of its supporters. While the law “On fundamentals of national resistance” was in place, the practical question of raising and training reserves had nevertheless not been resolved by the time Russia invaded.

Absent trained reserves, integration became an issue when volunteers flocked to resist the Russian invasion. An immediate problem was the fact that by the time of the invasion the Ukrainian politicians had not necessarily won over the volunteers. Many remained deeply skeptical about Zelensky. The appointment of Valerii Zaluzhnyi as the commander in chief of the armed forces of Ukraine in July 2021 had helped, as he was deemed a “Ukrainian” general in contrast to the “Soviet” generals of the previous generation. Sergey approvingly described Zaluzhnyi as being “like a volunteer”: he too “hated and sought to eliminate *sovok*.” In mid-2022 Burzhua claimed that Zaluzhnyi had so far done “everything right” in the war, yet later warned about the dangers of adulation and personality cults. Ultimately, even the sheer intensity of the war helped integration. As Burzhua claimed in March 2022, the early days of the war were chaotic, especially with territorial defense fighters headed toward the invading Russians. The intensity of the war nevertheless made, if not control, then at least coordination of force crucial. The alternative was “friendly fire guaranteed ... [and a] faster way to be put down by our own.”

Even with reforms, there were still several ways to manage integration. In a repetition of 2014, the state was unprepared to manage volunteers seeking the quickest way to engage Russian invaders. Burzhua’s self-organized drone squad was initially associated with a group of Ukrainian special forces, before being invited into a special police unit. They received their badges but were later required to take online courses about policing. The Azov-associated Kraken Regiment was subordinated to the MoD, not the armed forces (Kunkle and Korolchuk 2022), while the various foreign volunteer units of the International Legion were divided between the MoD and the armed forces. By the summer, even Right Sector units that had resisted control since 2014 were integrated into the army as special forces units in a manner that allowed them to retain their more freewheeling command culture (Krylenko and Mazyliuk 2022).

While these kinds of heterogenous command arrangements allowed for vibrant militias to be combined with regular military,

the arrangement again depended on a meeting of minds between the forces. This common purpose was provided by a common definition of the problem as Russian invasion. The command arrangements were often regarded as loose. For instance, Burzhua again described his squad as privateers, or as “war freelancers,” despite formally belonging to the Ukrainian police. In comparison to 2014–15, the Ukrainian state was more organized in a way that limited the size of volunteer groups. These kinds of small groups were ready to submit themselves voluntarily to more risk than the professional military – but only when they got to decide when and where. In Burzhua’s telling, the official police status of his squad had little effect, as they operated almost completely unofficially. When arriving on a new frontline location, they contacted the brigades and battalions, introduced themselves and their capabilities, and left their contact information. Coordination between various units was horizontal and often done between individuals in situ. As Burzhua put it, volunteers especially benefited from challenging and amending the cumbersome military machines of Russia and Ukraine with initiative: “we enjoy entropy and chaos, they don’t.” The question was whether the Ukrainian small and decentralized ad hoc command was advantageous or disadvantageous against much more centrally commanded Russian forces in the context of a large-scale mechanized war. Toward the end of 2023 even Burzhua was faced with the decision of deeper integration with the armed forces – and hence control – or more independence but lesser means to wage war. In the end, he opted to rely on his extensive networks in Ukraine and abroad to crowdfund drones and other matériel, and remained in the less hierarchical police force.

Use of Force

The absence of any Ukrainian discussion about “hybrid” war after February 2022 suggests that the greater intensity of the conflict made the situation much less ambiguous and more conventional for Ukrainians. This time around it was only Russia that sought

to wage an ambiguous and limited war that its forces were unprepared to fight. The Russian war planning was based on the faulty assumption of weak Ukrainian resistance. Troops' lack of preparedness resulted from secrecy. The invasion even surprised many of the Russian soldiers who crossed the Ukrainian border on February 24. Unprepared to meet large-scale resistance, the Russians soon ran out of steam. Ukraine and Ukrainians suffered from few illusions and regarded the conflict as an existential war of necessity. Even here it was the Russian side that more resembled the situation in 2014. The main reason for this was the SMO Russian forces undertook in Ukraine. Not unlike the ATO since 2014, even the SMO was a non-war waged by the military to protect "good" Ukrainians from "bad" Ukrainians. To explain their meager gains in Ukraine, Russian authorities later began to claim that the collective West was waging a "hybrid war" against Russia.

As Burzhua explained, whereas Ukrainian civilians were largely shielded from the war in 2014–15, the scale of the Russian invasion made the 2022 hostilities immediately feel like "a people's war" that provided a common national narrative for the geographic unit and its inhabitants. Unlike in 2014–15, when it was possible to remain passive, this time the spirit of Ukrainian resistance was a near national-scale phenomenon. Russian atrocities and missile attacks on cities across the country helped. It would nevertheless take many more than "very few" Ukrainians to save Ukraine. Unsurprisingly, according to one survey, 49 percent of Ukrainians were engaged in volunteer activities to support the war effort (Interfax-Ukraine 2023).

Ukrainians found their less rigid command structures beneficial as volunteers took initiative into their own hands in the early days of the war to join the military to defend the country. The benefit of large numbers of volunteers eager for a fight was that Ukraine could quickly deploy motivated people who knew how to fight. In December Burzhua described the volunteers as a "catalyst and a force that can give an extra push where it is needed" but explained that it was the military with its artillery and rockets that did most of the damage. For him the war was simultaneously a

“*Blade Runner* war,” with buzzing drones spotting enemies, mixed with First World War trenches and artillery that struck the enemies discovered. Burzhua saw drones as the future of warfare, but their proper use had yet to be scaled to the whole Ukrainian military. Sergey too emphasized that the role of the volunteers in 2022 was important, but not decisive. Unlike in 2014, in 2022 Ukraine had an army, which this time around did “great job” in defending the country.

The more intensive war demanded larger forces and better coordination between them. As Ukraine exhausted those volunteering for the war there was little alternative but to widen mobilization efforts. The definition of volunteers began to change as some facing imminent mobilization saw “volunteering” to specific units as a way to increase their chances of survival due to better equipment, leadership, and training. Volunteering on the civilian side continued unabated. Partisans – local volunteers or special forces operatives that operated in occupied areas – continued to find ways to inflict pain on their Russian opponents. Overall Ukrainian forces benefited from being the liberators against the Russian occupiers, as they could in many places count on logistics and intelligence support from civilians. While Ukrainians took a hard legal stance on collaboration with Russian occupiers, Russian attempts to weed out Ukrainian resistance and instill loyalty employed both torture chambers and cash payments. They too could rely on some political support from sympathizers. After annexing further Ukrainian regions to Russia, their remaining inhabitants were pressured to become Russian citizens. In October 2023 the Russian fall draft for the first time included residents of the occupied Ukrainian territories. Despite the polarized view of the war as between Ukrainians and Russians, many again found themselves in an intermediate gray area.

Just like Ukrainians previously with the ATO, with time and mounting casualties even Russians began to criticize the SMO. With pro-peace opposition silenced, pro-war hardliners like Igor Girkin initially gained ground, ostensibly because the administration that increasingly emphasized its nationalist credentials in the

absence of other alternatives found it difficult to silence them. As usual, Putin sought to appear the only “reasonable” actor. Russian authorities only moved against the pro-war hardliners after Prigozhin’s mutiny, and for instance charged the increasingly critical Girkin with “extremism.”

Toward the end of 2022, Russian forces in Ukraine were being pushed back by determined and foreign-supported Ukrainian forces. Two Ukrainian offensives, the first in Kharkiv and the second in Kherson on the western side of the Dnieper River, had demonstrated Russian weaknesses. Over the summer Ukraine had threatened Kherson with its forces and sought to interdict Russian logistics. When Russia reinforced its positions in Kherson, Ukrainian forces broke through weakened Russian defenses in Kharkiv in September. Large swathes of occupied area were liberated in a matter of weeks, thus demonstrating that because of limited means, Russia was only able to focus on one area at a time. In November Russian forces in Kherson retreated to the eastern side of the Dnieper in what constituted another victory for Ukraine.

As its forces retreated and the hastily mobilized support began to arrive to stabilize the front lines and stop Ukrainian advances, Russia amended its strategy. While Russian forces had previously employed terror, and terror historically had not shown itself to be a very successful strategy, in October Russia began to launch missiles and drones against Ukrainian critical infrastructure. This may well have been the first time a modern society dependent on such infrastructure was subjected to systematic attacks with precise weapon systems. With winter looming and the prospect of a prolonged war, Russian planners hoped the costs of war would become unbearable for Ukrainians and their decision-makers, who found it difficult to retaliate. Possibly, the only way for the attacks to stop was peace. But as the word “peace” was increasingly replaced by the word “victory” in Ukraine, Ukrainians had little alternative but to go on the offensive and attempt to liberate the remaining fifth of their country still occupied by Russia.

The Russian strategy of terror again relied on the hope that Ukrainian spirit of resistance would falter. Even if it would not,

Russia hoped that it could target Ukraine's Achilles' heel, or dependence of external support. Attacks against Ukrainian infrastructure had forced Ukraine to cease exporting energy to Europe. If Ukraine was further rendered inhospitable, flows of Ukrainian refugees might test the foreign resolve to support Ukraine. In any case, Ukraine's foreign backers would need to prioritize humanitarian needs over military ones, thus making it easier for Russia to stabilize the military situation and prolong the war.

Ukraine survived the mild winter, in part due to quick provision of anti-aircraft capabilities. Its much-awaited counteroffensive was nevertheless delayed from the spring to June 2023, at least in part because of delayed delivery of ammunition, vehicles, and training by its supporters. Once it commenced, the counteroffensive faltered within two weeks when as much as 20 percent of the weaponry used was damaged or destroyed by extensive Russian minefields and other defenses (Jakes, Kramer, and Schmitt 2023). By early October 2023, Ukraine had been able to liberate no more than 371 square kilometers of land (around 0.35 percent of the total area occupied by Russia before the counteroffensive) at a steep price for both parties. The front lines became largely static after the Russian withdrawal from Kherson the previous November, with seemingly little likelihood of a military breakthrough by either side. Prognoses at the time of writing expect the Russian economy to grow instead of collapsing, while Prigozhin's death in turn means that there are no obvious contesters to Putin's rule. Barring a surprise, it appears that the war will again become protracted in a way that will test the resolve and capability of not only Ukraine and Russia but also their supporters.

The Ukrainian spirit was nominated *Time* magazine's Person of the Year in December 2022. Time will tell how it will fare against the Russian spirit of 2022. Aside from the outcome of the war, another great unknown is how this protracted war will affect the Ukrainian and Russian societies. Even more than the limited war in Donbas this book has focused on, the Russo-Ukrainian war heralded much greater social and societal change because of its greater intensity. Will the war become the Winter War or war

of independence moment for Ukraine, where the nation has to come together and, through resistance, prove to Russia and the surrounding world that Ukrainian statehood is not imaginary? Will Ukraine's backers maintain their resolve and invest enough to allow Ukraine to win the war? What will and can this victory mean in concrete terms? And what will become of the increasingly autocratic Russia, where failed wars have repeatedly led to domestic unrest and, ultimately, revolutions?

Conclusions

It was January 2019, and Anna was looking forward to returning to the war. Sipping a drink in the middle of the day in a basement bar in Kyiv, Anna was adamant in her conviction that the war had to be won; there was no alternative to victory, lest her own country go under. More specifically, two reasons motivated her redeployment. First, she had experienced too much suffering resulting from the war. By protecting Ukraine, she felt that she protected those she cared about from hurt. Secondly, Anna had grown weary of people who complained about the war. Most of them had not experienced it and did not know what war was. Like many others who fought, Anna became irritated when such people grumbled that they were exhausted by war. How could those complaining be tired of something they had never dealt with in the first place?

At that point, few believed that Russia would try to invade three years later. This likely contributed to the weariness that had crept in for both civilian and military volunteers. Several had begun to doubt whether they had made the correct choice in dedicating their lives to what they continued to anticipate as an uphill battle. Many of those involved in the war described how Ukraine consisted of two parallel realities which rarely overlapped. In the one where the combatants lived, Ukraine was at war. The inhabitants of this reality had to live with the facts of personal sacrifice, death, and suffering. In contrast, those living in the other one believed that the war in eastern Ukraine was not a fact but a personal choice: “I did not send you there,” they claimed. While some drew inspiration from the volunteers’ feats and saw them as heroes, others viewed them as dangerously traumatized and even as criminals.

Most did not want to listen to veterans or their problems, preferring to wash their hands of any responsibility for those who had suffered, perhaps for the sake of these very people. Several veterans and volunteers felt that those who were doing them down should not enjoy the same rights without bearing some of the responsibilities. During one of our discussions, Anna compared inactivity to crime and described how those who remained both inactive and ungrateful had their own place in hell. Alternately, as Olexa bitterly put it, "very few Ukrainians saved Ukraine."

The bitterness was understandable. A bullet had passed through Artem's hand, and after 17 operations he could now only manage a weak handshake. He still struggled with an opioid addiction following the pain management after the injury and the operations. Artem was unlikely to completely recover. Bogdan, whose spine was injured in an explosion, was in a similar situation. He lost 5 centimeters of height and suffered from recurring headaches. When we spoke, he often had to take a break and go outside for a while, seemingly for a smoke. Like several other injured veterans, he too self-medicated by smoking marijuana, which remained illegal in Ukraine. In July 2023 parliament passed a law backed by several veterans to allow marijuana for medical use to help war wounded cope with trauma.

Sergey returned from the war physically unharmed, but with persistent nightmares. Dreams brought him back to Donbas. In those dreams he ran out of ammunition and had to wait for imminent capture and torture by separatists. He kept waking up screaming until his wife placed his rifle next to the bed. When he touched the rifle, he felt safe and calmed down. He never sought professional help in dealing with his evident PTSD. Finally, there was Anna. In response to stress, she drank too much and ate too little, but at least she regularly talked with a psychotherapist. In her case her deep engagement stood in relation to her family background, where generations have fought – and suffered and died – for an independent Ukraine.

The parallel realities experienced by those who fought the war increasingly concerned even the validity of the war itself. As Bud-

dha put it, those fighting it had “no ground to stand, no one to kill, no one to die for ... no ground to wage war.” The early part of the war in which the volunteers were lauded for stopping the initial spread of separatism in eastern Ukraine was gradually becoming subsumed in the official view of the war as one between Ukraine and Russia. During the early stages of the war in the spring of 2014, the volunteers collectively formed one major actor. Many continue to celebrate them as heroes who stood up when security services failed the country, especially on Defenders of Ukraine Day (October 14 before 2023, when the date was moved to October 1). If not for their efforts and sacrifices, insurgents would have spread and likely occupied a much larger chunk of Ukraine, as they initially sought to do. It should not be forgotten that both Kharkiv and Odesa were threatened in the spring of 2014, while Mariupol was briefly captured. From this perspective, the volunteers had indeed “saved the country” (Hladka et al. 2017). Some volunteers like Kazhan were proud to proclaim that “we won that war.” The war in question was of course the early fight against separatism; beating Russia militarily once it intervened was never a very realistic prospect in 2014–15 without massive external support – which Ukraine sought, but never received.

Alongside the struggle on the front lines that was deemed unwinnable was a political struggle to reform the system on the home front. Even this struggle remained difficult. One civil society reformer described his existence as reminiscent of the 1993 movie *Groundhog Day*, in which Bill Murray’s weather reporter is forced to relive the same day over and over. Working in the health sector, this reformer woke up every day to meet challenges he already thought he had helped overcome. Several of his colleagues despaired at the inadequate performance of institutions, with the upshot that it was individuals like them who had to bear burdens. This raised questions about whether the system could be reformed, or overcome. For some this dedication caused anxiety, and burnouts were not uncommon.

The Ukrainian spirit of resistance emerged first on the Maidan in November 2013, ignited the volunteer Spirit of 2014 after the

Russian invasion and annexation of Crimea, and ultimately kept burning until it surprised the invading Russian forces in 2022. Early on many welcomed the volunteer movement. Volunteers and volunteering were deemed necessary due to state weakness, but also demonstrated the unity of Ukraine – or at least parts of it. Yet strong emotions did not last. As Tosya explained, there was weak sentiment but no strong emotion: while the urgency of the revolution continued into the early stages of the war, it gradually disappeared as the fighting dragged on. Moreover, the perception that, even with new rulers, the state was still failing its people, made matters worse. The view that the state – which, after all, consisted of many oligarchs with substantial wealth that they used to protect their own interests, rather than those of Ukrainians – did not take the responsibility for the war, even as it grew more intense, became increasingly problematic. People paid taxes to the state, expecting the state to gradually take responsibility for the war. Many were disappointed. Corruption continued within the state and its armed forces. As one soldier quipped, “we have a beautiful country, but an abominable state” (Chernyshev 2015).

In this sense the dynamics in Ukraine in the 21st century resembled those of a century earlier. The “naive enthusiasm” of the First World War did not survive the prolonged conflict (Verhey 2003). Similar unrealistic expectations also led to disillusionment in Ukraine. Yet the political context made the situation more complex in 2014 than 1914. In Ukraine the fight was not merely against an external enemy, but to some extent also against an internal one. In addition to uniting through a common enemy and the loss of territory where many had opposed the Maidan Revolution and what it came to represent, the war also divided. A further complication came from the Maidan Revolution, which few of the volunteers saw as finished. While Germany too experienced a revolution, it would not come until after the First World War. Like elsewhere in the post-Soviet sphere, foreign policy became a way to ward off criticism of failed domestic reforms. Anyone who disagreed risked being designated a crony of Putin.

Yet no matter how much or how highly Ukrainian leaders spoke of a “people’s army,” no such army materialized in Ukraine in 2014–15. There were the volunteers who rose against separatism, many of whom consider their most important achievement to be bringing much needed courage and motivation to the armed forces to join the fray. Much else was the Ukrainian version of the mythmaking of the German Spirit of 1914, conveniently contained in the Ukrainian armed forces. Despite everything, the Ukrainian Spirit of 2014 nevertheless endured as the civic and ethnic dimensions of Ukrainian national identity grew closer to each other. This process was only strengthened by the Russian invasion in 2022 (Onuch and Hale 2022; Wilson 2023). The long-term effects would of course in part depend on the outcome of the conflict.

Strategy and the Ukrainian Volunteer Battalions

From the outset, the premise for this study of the Ukrainian volunteer battalions was that investigation of cases often disregarded by strategic theory can offer useful insights for broader theory. This corresponds with Lawrence Freedman’s (2013, xii) observation on the importance of studying underdogs. The practical quandary in Ukraine – Russian occupation of Crimea and rising separatism in the east – required new means, a task initially fulfilled by the volunteer battalions. This empirical case comes with several methodological and theoretical implications for strategic theory, which has recently begun to broaden its focus from Western states and their armed forces to other cases. The shifting of the location and character of conflict alone necessitates this kind of broadening. Methodologically, ethnography offers one way to further this broadening, especially in the investigation of non-state actors that leave a limited paper trail. Theoretically, recognizing the importance of non-state armed groups does not undermine the relevance of state militaries (Van Creveld 1991). As illustrated by both Ukraine and Russia, both state and non-state actors often operate side by side in the same conflict theaters. That said, an analysis of

non-state actors shows that strategic theory's emphasis on Western use of force comes with assumptions which do not necessarily hold true with non-Western and non-state actors. Sociologically, the emphasis on "people's armies" and mass have returned the people as a core consideration of contemporary war.

Ukrainian volunteer battalions offer a clear case where strategy was hardly limited to state actors, or mere use of force. A militia strategy had to encompass more. In the spring of 2014, force limitations deriving from the ambiguous situation and state weakness resulted in a vacuum not merely of political authority but also of force to maintain territorial sovereignty. In this situation it was necessary to create – and then to control and to use – force. Past studies' focus on states, their societies, and their armed forces as a single package has nevertheless often bypassed the necessity of the first two processes. More often than not, they have been taken for granted. The case of the Ukrainian volunteer battalions thus highlights how Eurocentric state bias limits the study of strategy. Volunteer battalions also offer a rare case where the initial processes of creation, control, and use of force proceeded in a largely chronological sequence. This has allowed examination of the evolution of each process in turn. After completing the first sequence, the three processes revert to a more familiar pattern where they proceed in tandem, with each constantly influencing the other two. This process continues at the time of writing, even if the intensity of the war has contributed to concentration of power around the Ukrainian state.

The case of the volunteer battalions also demonstrates how politics saturate the creation, control, and use of force. None of the three processes, nor the war waged by the volunteer battalions, can be understood without paying attention to their surrounding context. Volunteers first emerged during the Maidan Revolution in the winter of 2013–14, influenced by the Spirit of 2014. After toppling the Yanukovich regime and witnessing the Russian occupation of the Crimean Peninsula, some of these volunteers took up arms. None of this would have been possible without popular support from their surrounding society.

Many of the volunteers who mobilized to war felt they had no choice but to do so. With the political legitimacy of Ukrainian institutions under siege, the reeling state appeared unable to protect its territorial sovereignty. It was the volunteers who prevented the further unraveling of Ukraine.

Behind this acute need to act was the Spirit of 2014. It was this spirit that enabled the force in the first place, and also influenced every facet of the conflict that followed. From the perspective of the new interim government, the volunteers were disruptive, but necessary. In the absence of other force, the new political elites had no alternative but to rely on them. Military and security officials – whose passivity encouraged both separatism and the mobilization of the volunteer battalions alike – also viewed them with suspicion. The military elites especially found the volunteers to be unwelcome and potentially dangerous contenders.

Politics directly influenced conflict dynamics and the volunteers' use of force. Russian media in particular branded the volunteers as neo-Nazis bent on punishing Russian speakers in eastern Ukraine. While overexaggerated, it is necessary to recognize that the "order" the volunteers sought to create and maintain was inherently political. Similar examples can be found elsewhere. In interwar Germany and the Baltics, the Freikorps kept communism in check, yet through much more brutal means (Waite 1969). In Finland the civil guard militias that had prevailed in the vicious civil war became the guarantor of "white" political order that followed (Ahlbäck 2014). More recently, militias have played central roles in places like Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen. Even state armed forces' force structures are influenced by political decisions – for instance about class, ethnicity, and gender – which inevitably come with sociological and political consequences. The political dimension of the creation of force is thus crucial for understanding conflict dynamics, and hence strategy, in all wars.

The volunteer battalions grew out of the ambiguous political context that followed the Maidan Revolution. Much of the ambiguity resulted from a discrepancy between expectations and the

reality of war. No war was ever formally declared in Donbas. Dubbing it an ATO helped little in indicating how the situation should be managed. The ATO initially limited the purview of the armed forces and further muddled whether it constituted a revolution from within or without. For all intents and purposes, this was a war that never was.

The volunteer battalions emerged in this context characterized by ambiguity, state weakness, political uncertainty, and threat. This context set the parameters for strategy in Ukraine. Ambiguity is even found in the term "volunteer battalion" itself. While "volunteer" suggests irregularity and origins in people rather than state, the subsequent "battalion" speaks to a relatively robust regular military unit. While the professionalism of the volunteers can be debated – most had no previous military experience but at least were willing to engage their opponents – they largely replicated state functions. Volunteer battalions essentially became "little black men," an antidote to Russian "little green men." Despite the murky affairs they soon got involved in, and despite the expectation that non-state actors' participation in war leads to unrestricted escalation of violence (Clausewitz 2004; Duyvesteyn 2012), the volunteers by and large remained restrained. From their organization to their conduct, it appears the volunteers more often than not followed transnational norms of conventional warfare (Farrell 2007). That the war thus became rather conventional is a remarkable, and from the perspective of military theory to an extent surprising, development. Part of the explanation for this comes from norms, and hence cultural sociology. Aside from the volunteers' ideology, even their perception of war is crucial for understanding why and how they waged it. If the early stages of the war of the volunteer battalions constituted anarchy, it was at most anarchy within a specific framework that both guided and restricted their action.

Another part of the explanation behind the volunteers' restraint traces their effectiveness to the control of force. From the perspective of Ukrainian elites, volunteers had to be kept in check. Control of force was not only required for preventing nega-

tive political outcomes, but equally essential for achieving positive ones. The elite strategies had to address both internal and external dimensions, or domestic politics and international relations, as well as the adversary. Control of force was crucial for ensuring that violence remained purposeful, deliberate, and legitimized. It kept escalation of the war in check and facilitated coordination between forces. All this depended on at least some degree of command and hence control over force.

Several volunteers interviewed considered escalation their main achievement, so here their and the governments' interests conflicted. By marshaling violence, the volunteers pushed back separatism, while simultaneously pulling the government and its armed forces into the conflict. Some volunteers furthermore believed that drawing Russia into an open war with Ukraine would have led to broad mobilization and unity among Ukrainians. Others believed the price completely unacceptable. The political nature of the volunteers complicated attempts to control them. Reformation of the state and the political system were inherent in the volunteer ethos of 2014. Many of the volunteers had participated in toppling one regime. In the absence of reforms, they also threatened to take down the ones that followed. State weakness, political considerations, and the legitimacy ascribed to the volunteers limited the ways the Ukrainian elites could control force. Simply the fact that the volunteers were among the most trusted Ukrainian institutions made violent crackdown difficult. Norms thus played a role even in the control of force. After the government established itself as the representative of Ukraine and Ukrainians, it instead sought to normalize the situation and maintain existing power structures through equating disobedient volunteers with the separatists they fought.

Finally, there is the use of force. Many of the activities the volunteers engaged in were described as policiary rather than strictly military tasks. In practice this meant that "restoration" of public order – in effect, consolidation of political authority – initially largely rested on the volunteers' shoulders. At the same time the volunteers fought against separatists and spearheaded

assaults against their positions. By the summer of 2014, separatists were fleeing, but a unilateral ceasefire declared by President Poroshenko stopped the advance of the combined Ukrainian forces. This allowed the separatists to dig in, while Russian support increased. Gradually, the volunteers became outcoordinated, outgunned, and outmaneuvered, as proven first at Ilovaisk, and later at the airports and Debaltseve.

Increasing state participation in the conflict correlated with the intensity of the war. With increased intensity, front lines emerged, and the war conventionalized. It is almost as if those serving in the Ukrainian military had waged a different war, where politics was lifted from the ground to Kyiv. Instead of conducting policiary tasks, they described the war they waged in rather traditional military terms reminiscent of an interstate war. With increased military engagement, the shades of gray the volunteers struggled with began to polarize into black and white.

The volunteer battalions were becoming part of a bygone phenomenon within a year after the start of the war in Donbas. Many left after the Minsk ceasefire agreements or were integrated into state structures. Some felt betrayed by the politicians who had made concessions in signing the agreements. Aside from a few volunteer units like Right Sector, even the strict combat role of volunteers began to change. The gradual removal of volunteers from the front lines diminished opportunities for aggressive soldiering. While volunteers could be asked to do "special operations" that the armed forces could not legally engage in, this was not very common. With maneuver warfare turning into static trench warfare, heroics were replaced by labor. It was almost impossible to take the initiative, as frontline duties mostly entailed sitting in trenches, with few opportunities to respond to enemy sniping and artillery fire. This shift demoralized the volunteers and had limited appeal to those primarily motivated by the more aggressive Spirit of 2014. During this time, the evolution of strategy in the war first achieved a stable structure. By now it was clear that the war had, for the first time, required Ukraine to assume some of the responsibilities associated with statehood.

The stable structure for strategy did not end the importance of the creation, control, and use of force, but merely reduced the ambiguity of the situation. Incorporation, and hence legalization, of volunteers into state structures, was an important part of this process. Because of its unpopularity, Ukraine ended deployment of conscripts to the ATO zone in late 2016. In order to continue waging the war, the Ukrainian military depended on substantial reforms during a time of war in order to attain NATO standards. After years of neglect, these reforms were already in 2018 described as “painful” and “remarkable” – yet also insufficient. Corruption, lack of civilian oversight, and poor transparency continued to obstruct international support (Akimenko 2018).

Western experts in security sector reform came with their own ideas of professional militaries, and believed, for instance, that “conscription and mobilization are not good methods for creating a force capable of fighting in the current conflict,” and would in any case be too expensive for Ukraine (Oliker et al. 2016, 48–49; see also Zagorodnyuk et al. 2021). It was true that while Ukraine dedicated 3 percent of its GDP to defense, the weak Ukrainian economy and corruption complicated reforms. Yet when it came to matters like ending conscription, many Ukrainians disagreed. Overall, they criticized “the systematic imposition of Western models and standards on a Ukrainian army that is not necessarily ready to absorb them, at least in the short term, given its history and current commitments” (Facon 2017, 12, 21). This criticism may in part be explained by Ukrainian domestic politics and different priorities. While Westerners emphasized long-term reforms based on NATO standards and the prospect of a continued limited war in Donbas, Ukrainians sought ways to more immediately improve military capabilities in a wider war against Russia.

Aside from financing new equipment and training, retention was a major problem. Despite some efforts, the armed forces struggled to improve service conditions. Volunteer organizations emphasized that the main problems with retention concerned bureaucracy (most of which they claimed was still made on paper), lack of societal support, and poor salary and service

conditions (Come Back Alive! 2020). Aside from assigning ATO veterans to an “operational reserve,” no one seemed to be able to offer a good solution for retaining the volunteers unwilling to join the armed forces even as trained reserves (Grant 2019). It was not until January 1, 2022, that Ukraine finally adopted the law “On fundamentals of national resistance,” which regulated territorial defense efforts as a branch of the Ukrainian military, manned by volunteers, and tasked the Ukrainian special forces with organizing resistance movements. Years before this legislation, virtually everyone interviewed emphasized how the lessons learned during the war had not been forgotten; they expected civilian and military volunteers to remobilize in case the conflict escalated in the future. Ukrainian total defense thus continued to rely on the Ukrainian volunteer spirit of resistance – which, together with the success of Ukrainian military reforms, surprised the Russian planners behind the invasion launched on February 24, 2022.

While it was not obvious how they would do it, literally all the key Ukrainian volunteer battalion combatants interviewed returned to war. Several participated in defending Kyiv in the early days of the war as members of small volunteer groups that fought as part of the territorial defense, or some more ad hoc arrangement. Centralization during the war has since brought many of them to serve in the armed forces. At the time of writing, one has been killed in combat. Many more have been wounded, several seriously. Offering sobering evidence of the strength of the Ukrainian spirit of resistance, all of those say that they are recovering, with the intention to continue to resist the Russian invasion on the front lines. Only time will tell how this spirit will fare and endure in a protracted war.

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Introductory Note

References such as ‘178–79’ indicate (not necessarily continuous) discussion of a topic across a range of pages. Wherever possible in the case of topics with many references, these have either been divided into sub-topics or only the most significant discussions of the topic are listed. Because the entire work is about ‘Ukraine’, the use of this term (and certain others which occur constantly throughout the book) as an entry point has been restricted. Information will be found under the corresponding detailed topics. Cross-references such as ‘see also individual names’ direct the reader to entries in a category (e.g. in this case ‘Zelensky, Volodymyr’) rather than a specific ‘individual names’ entry.

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'Slava Ukraini!' *Strategy and the Spirit of Ukrainian Resistance* tells the story of the volunteers lauded to have saved Ukraine twice. The volunteers first emerged in the spring of 2014 after the onset of the war in Donbas in a context characterized by ambiguity, state weakness, political uncertainty, and threat. They re-emerged again in February 2022 to stop the large-scale Russian invasion.

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