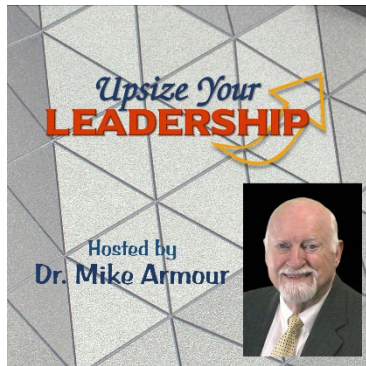


# Backstories Behind the Ukrainian Conflict

Hosted by Dr. Mike Armour

**Episode UYL2206**

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My podcast last week on “A Ukraine You Never Hear About” had an amazing response. The number of downloads quickly tripled the number for any previous episode. And the level of feedback on social media, by email, and in person shattered any I’ve had in the four years of the podcast.

I recorded that podcast two days before the Russian invasion from Belarus began. But based on my years of experience on the ground in Ukraine, I predicted that the world would be surprised at the level of determined and spirited resistance which the Ukrainians would mount. A week into the war, the world is seeing what I meant.

In putting the podcast together, I did not address some salient points which now, in the wake of a full-blown invasion, could give my listeners a deeper grasp of the story which is going on behind the story in the news media.

Therefore, this week I want to follow-up on more of the backstory to the Ukrainian crisis. And for this episode, I’m drawing not only on my familiarity with Ukraine, but also on my background as a retired Navy captain in the field of intelligence and as a military historian by training. My goal is to pull these two streams of knowledge together to offer a perspective on how things are likely to play out going forward.

And because the overall theme of this podcast is leadership, I also want to help you understand the challenge which Russia faces in terms of leadership on the battlefield.

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Before my first trip to Ukraine to address the National Academy of Science, I had overseen a number of projects and conducted a number of workshops in Russia. I stepped off the plane in Kiev, therefore, assuming that I would be meeting people very much like the typical Russian with whom I had worked for years. In very short order, I had dismissed that assumption.

Although there are considerable religious, cultural, and linguistic overlaps between the Russians and the Ukrainians, there are marked differences – differences which are showing up in spades in the current conflict.

Seven decades of Soviet authoritarianism had squelched any inkling of a free spirit in the outlooks and attitudes of the ordinary Russians with whom I had worked. Their middle-aged and

older generations in particular often manifested what I can best describe as a fatalistic sense of powerlessness. They might not like things which were happening in the world around them. But they made their peace with it, because there was nothing else that they could do. At least, in their own way of thinking about options.

Within hours of my first day in Kiev, I was dealing with an entirely different mindset. I was in conversation with people who did not hesitate to think freely, to speak openly about their disagreement with the status quo, to challenge the views of authorities, and to demand a solid rationale for impositions made on them.

And because they were free-spirited, they were also open to innovation. As a people, the Ukrainians are highly innovative and inventive. They struggled for centuries under the heel of nearby empires who exploited them. To survive, they had to learn how to improvise. And they are masters of improvisation. Let me give you an example.

The Soviets left the medical system in Ukraine in a shameful state, with poor hospital facilities and highly outdated equipment. About twelve years ago I coordinated a project to provide a laparoscopic surgical tower for the leading gynecological hospital in western Ukraine. Neither they nor any other hospital that we knew of in Ukraine had such a tool. The hospital was in the southwest, in the town of Ivano-Frankivsk. I made the trip to deliver the equipment with a highly-accomplished surgeon from the U.S. and an American technician who would set up the equipment.

Immediately after the equipment was installed, the surgeon was to conduct a surgery, giving him an opportunity to train the Ukrainians in how to use the surgical tower. But we were concerned that once we left, they would have no local expertise to draw on to trouble-shoot the equipment if something malfunctioned.

While the installation was underway, two young doctors showed up, having heard what was happening. They had a small, private clinic a few blocks away. They were both fluent in English (which was rare in that part of Ukraine at the time) and asked if they might assist with the surgery. "We can help with translation," they said. "Besides, we know this equipment very well." We wanted to know how they had come by their knowledge. They answered, "Because we have a tower like this in our clinic. We just don't tell anyone, because it might be stolen."

It turned out that a Canadian humanitarian group had brought them the basic surgical tower years before, promising to return later with the necessary attachments. But the Canadians never returned. So, these two doctors figured out the kind of attachments which they needed, and in collaboration with a local metal-working shop, they simply built the attachments themselves. Later, when we visited their clinic and saw their instruments, the surgeon who accompanied me was amazed at how well-designed and functional they were. "In the U.S., I would have to pay thousands of dollars for instruments like this," he said.

This is a particularly striking example of Ukrainian improvisation. But I could point you to numerous other places in which I've encountered this imaginative and inventive spirit of Ukrainians. We are seeing that spirit already in efforts to thwart the Russian invasion. The Ukrainians have obviously made a serious study of Russian doctrines of warfare and know just where it is vulnerable. Much of their success thus far has been the result of exploiting these vulnerabilities. They have literally taken the fight to the Russians, when most people expected them to sit back in a defensive posture and try to fend off attacks as they materialized.

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Improvisation, of course, can only occur in an atmosphere of freedom. The Ukrainians therefore cherish freedom. For the past two decades, Russia has progressively reverted more and more to the authoritarianism of the Soviet era – even the Stalinist era. Ukraine, by contrast, has spent the last two decades pushing back time and again against autocracy in a quest to make their nation more democratic and free.

Now the Ukrainian government is harnessing this freedom-loving spirit in a way that could never be duplicated in Russia at present. Can you imagine Putin opening his nation's armories and issuing AK47s to ordinary citizens the way the Zelensky government has done across Ukraine? Can you envision Putin encouraging civilians to form neighborhood defense forces and training them how to make Molotov cocktails? That's precisely what Ukrainian national television is doing.

No, an autocrat like Putin must keep his people under control for fear that arming them or giving them self-determination would give them an opportunity to overthrow him. That's the nature of autocratic regimes like his. They feel compelled to maximize control over freedom of action.

To assure this control, they must minimize the number of people who can make decisions or take initiatives on their own. And this limiting of initiative is particularly important when it comes to the military. If you encourage, equip, and empower low-ranking officers and soldiers to step into decision-making roles, you run the risk of the rank-and-file military turning against the regime. Thus, to keep the rank-and-file in check, their freedom to make decisions must be severely curtailed.

In today's Russian army, therefore, even company commanders in the midst of combat are given little authority to choose a course of action without clearance and permission from above. Officers below the upper levels of their profession receive little training in leadership and independent decision-making. And there is certainly no encouragement of those in the lower echelons to take combat initiatives on their own.

Contrast this to the training of American troops, both enlisted and officer, who begin to be schooled in leadership from their first days in uniform. They quickly learn that when the moment calls for it, they are personally responsible for exercising appropriate initiative.

The discouragement of leadership and initiative in the Russian military is a holdover from the nation's communist past. I began teaching leadership courses in Russia shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall. What I found was a wholesale reluctance for people to refer to themselves as leaders. In the Soviet era, you see, if you held yourself out as a leader, people above you could easily perceive you as a potential threat to their power. And suddenly, quietly, you would simply disappear. People therefore learned to astutely avoid any reference to themselves as a leader.

A few years after the fall of Marxism, I ran into that hesitancy headlong. It happened in a three-day training which I conducted in Novosibirsk at the request of the region's ministry of education. The class participants were all deputy directors at post-secondary institutions in that part of Russia. Over two-dozen schools were represented. But even though they were deputy directors of respected universities and technical institutes, the participants objected whenever I referred to them as leaders. "I am not a leader," one class member or another would shout. "I am only a deputy director." The pushback finally became so intense that we had to discontinue the training in midstream because I had lost so much credibility by trying to persuade them that they could indeed be leaders. They could not envision anyone except the authority figure at the top being considered a leader.

Parenthetically, the situation was even worse in Romania, where the dictator Ceausescu prohibited anyone other than himself being referred to as a leader. As a result, once his regime was toppled, it was considered an insult if I said to someone, "You have great leadership potential." To a Romanian, that was the equivalent of me saying, "You remind me a lot Ceausescu," whom most people detested.

Now, take the practice of discouraging initiative in the frontline ranks and apply it to what's happening currently in Ukraine. The Russians have clearly stumbled into a combat scenario that they had never envisioned. However, their combat units going toe-to-toe with Ukrainian forces are not prepared by training or conditioning to innovate on the fly.

How different this is from the Ukrainian approach. Not only does the entrenched Ukrainian spirit of patriotism embolden them, their improvisational mindset serves them well. Civilians and soldiers alike feel free to use their imagination and creativity to develop and implement innovative solutions to thorny combat challenges which confront them. To cite just one simple example, citizens all across Ukraine spontaneously took it upon themselves to start swapping out street and roadway signs in order to confuse and misdirect invading ground forces.

Will Ukrainian innovation and improvisations succeed in denying Russia its goal of overrunning Ukraine's major cities? Probably not, in my judgment. The Russians are now showing that they will not hesitate to reduce civilian apartment complexes to rubble, to choke off humanitarian aid, and starve the population and its defenders into submission. But once they conquer, will the Russians be able to sustain their control? There, I believe, the long range favors the Ukrainians.

Militarily, you see, the challenge of an invader is not only to conquer initially, but to be able to hold onto what they have conquered. Conquest invariably triggers resistance. And in Ukraine's case, it will be a battle-hardened, combat-experienced underground guerilla movement. And this will be nothing new to the Ukrainians. They have a proud history of insurgency against unwanted overlords.

For instance, with their location next door to Poland, Ukraine was overrun by Germany early in the Second World War. As was true elsewhere, the Nazis were unspeakably cruel. They used their control of Ukraine to carry out some of the most heinous massacres of Jews committed anywhere by the Third Reich. In Kiev alone they killed over 30,000 Jews in one 48-hour period, the first phase of what eventually translated into the mass murder of nearly 100,000 Jews, gypsies, and others whom the Nazis considered unfit to live.

Throughout the Nazi occupation, determined guerilla groups carried on an insurgency against their occupiers. Needless to say, the Nazis made ruthless efforts to suppress them, and the insurgents paid with their lives by the hundreds. For the Ukrainians, however, these insurgents have been celebrated heroes ever since. Thus, Russia's atrocities in Ukraine will no doubt unleash another Ukrainian guerilla underground. Their determined patriotic zeal, coupled with their skill at innovation and improvisation, will be a constant and costly irritant for occupying Russian forces. And because Ukraine is such a large country, there are countless enclaves from which guerillas could operate.

To thwart them, the Russians would be forced to maintain a huge occupation army, exacting a crippling cost on the Russian economy. Once the Russian economy starts feeling the teeth of the recently undertaken international sanctions against its commerce and financial institutions, Moscow will rapidly drain its monetary reserves and lose its the ability to sustain the Ukrainian occupation financially.

Thousands will die in the process, of course – thousands on both sides. In the long run, however, I believe that inventiveness, improvisation, and the passion for freedom will win out. Zelensky has already established himself as an inspirational leader whose success at rallying his nation will be studied as a stellar example of leadership for decades to come. Even if Zelensky is killed, he will be revered as a national martyr whose memory will continue to energize and galvanize efforts of a relentless Ukrainian insurgency. Putin may win the war. But he's unlikely to secure final victory.

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