

Putin reminds military brass why Russia's at war vs. Ukraine



President Putin and Chief of the General Staff and First Deputy Minister of Defence Valery Gerasimov at Tuesday's expanded meeting of the Defence Ministry Board.

Yesterday, Russian President Vladimir Putin addressed an expanded meeting of the Defense Ministry Board, which consists of the leadership of the services, directorates, and administrative agencies of the Russian military, including the heads of the central military command and control organizations as well as representatives of the command of the military districts and branches of the Armed Forces – in short, the top brass of the Russian military. In the meeting, called to summarize the results of the military's activities over the past year and identify priorities and assign responsibilities for the year ahead, Putin, accompanied by Minister of Defense Sergey Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff and First Deputy Minister of Defence Valery Gerasimov, who is also the overall commander of the Russian forces operating in Ukraine, spoke at some length about a number of problems pertaining to communication systems, reconnaissance, target designation, counter-battery warfare methods, and the production and supply of various types of military equipment.

In concluding, Putin said, “considering the circumstances we are living, working, and fighting a war in, I would be remiss in not mentioning it. I would like to revisit the causes of the current conflict. The audience we have here is quite knowledgeable, but I still think it is important to highlight certain things and to point out the reasons for today's conflict in Ukraine.” [With that audience, Putin was finally willing to call the war a war, rather than a “special military operation,” the term he used in announcing it on Feb. 24, 2022 and continued to use until yesterday.]

Going back to the time shortly after the demise of the Soviet Union, Putin said the West was “active in the post-Soviet space, tearing apart the newly formed independent states, the former Soviet republics. A particular emphasis, even before the collapse of the Soviet Union, was placed on Ukraine... They [the West] bet primarily on nationalists. They forgot that these extreme nationalists were former Nazis that collaborated with Hitler..... We had done everything we could over the decades to develop normal relations with our neighboring state. We have always said, and I keep saying, that this is a fraternal people. However, this adversary acted differently.” He said Russia emphasized the regions in southern and eastern Ukraine “because these are historically Russian regions. They are inhabited, in fact, by Russian people regardless of any stamp in their passports. They have only one native tongue – Russian, and their entire culture and traditions are also Russian, everything. They are our people. We always focused on this part of Ukraine.... The political forces and leaders that claimed the state’s top positions always had to consider the opinion of the voters in the southeast of Ukraine.... Without this, it was impossible to come to power. But as soon as these forces came to power, they immediately forgot about these regions. Nobody thought about their interests or mandates, and the authorities instantly followed in the wake of the extreme nationalists that were active, offensive and aggressive.... We tried to counter this. How? Primarily with an economic approach... We sold them energy for next to nothing, gave them loans and encouraged cooperation. Believe me, we did everything to build relations... But no. Relying on these active and aggressive nationalist forces in Ukraine, the West simply did not leave us any chance for this. But they also realized their inability to achieve their ultimate goals through legal means and to drag all of Ukraine to their side. It just didn’t work out that way. The residents of the southeast went to the polling stations and voted for those who spoke about good relations with Russia.... So what did they eventually choose? A coup d’état.”

Continuing, he said, “They realized that they wouldn’t be able to steamroll Ukraine using just political means, and they took advantage of the mistakes and miscalculations of the then Ukrainian leadership – again with an emphasis on aggressive nationalist forces – and fomented a coup” (referring to the removal from office and replacement of Ukrainian President Yanukovich after he fled to Russia on Feb. 22, 2014).... We had no choice but to support Crimea, or else it would have drowned in blood. But then the issue of Donbass arose. You know, we tried to negotiate a peaceful solution. Overall, we were ready, under certain conditions outlined in the Minsk agreements, to gradually restore the territorial integrity of Ukraine, including Donbass, in order to keep the local people out of harm’s way and to create proper conditions and guarantees for their safety. That was the whole point of the Minsk agreements. But if the Ukrainian authorities

and their Western handlers had agreed to it, agreed to implement these arrangements, everything would have gradually – I sincerely believe it – would have worked out. But they did not agree to it and unleashed a real war there in 2014.... We did nothing but were gradually forced to get involved in order to protect the people and save them from extermination. That is how it all began. “

Continuing, he said, “The West, especially the people overseas, enjoyed watching this. In this sense, they outplayed us if I can put it that way. We were compelled to respond to this aggressive position. Later, they simply tossed out the Minsk agreements, said this publicly, and then the Western Leaders said it publicly and confessed that this was just a front to revive or rather build up Ukraine’s armed forces. Why do that? Here comes the second part of their plot. It was to pull Ukraine into NATO. And this is what they kept telling me: what are you concerned about, we will not let them join right now. I said, what about tomorrow? When will this tomorrow come? In a year? Two years? Looking at it from the historical perspective and from the strategic interests of the Russian state, even 10 or 15 years are unacceptable.... They said back in 1991 – not an inch eastward.... Here they are, at our fence, sticking out here. And they stuck there. They took the Baltic region and all of Eastern Europe. The same question suggests itself – why? But the point is simple...to them, a country like Russia is not needed – it’s too big. It should be divided into pieces and subjugated – the same way they are subjugating Europe. ...In short, they basically brought these matters to the point of war. They unleashed the war in 2014, and we had to get involved gradually. Unfortunately, or maybe not, we had no choice, we had to get involved.”

In early December, British Defence Intelligence estimated that between Feb. 24, 2022, when Putin’s “special military operation” began, and the end of November 70,000 Russians had been killed and 220,000 to 280,000 had been seriously wounded and removed from combat. As of today, Ukraine’s Ministry of Defence reports that Russia has experienced 349,000 “combat losses” – that is, soldiers killed or wounded and removed from combat. One wonders how many of those who listened to Putin yesterday believe that what Russia has gained in almost two years of war is worth having had more than 70,000 killed and more than 250,000 seriously wounded.

David R. Cameron
December 20, 2023