

As year three of war begins, Russian offensive continues in the east



President Zelenskyy with European Commission President von der Leyen and Prime Ministers Trudeau, Meloni, and De Croo at the Remembrance Wall in Kyiv Saturday.

On Feb. 24, 2022, Russian President Putin went on television at 6 a.m. and announced that “with permission of Russia’s Federation Council, and in execution of the treaties of friendship and mutual assistance with the Donetsk People’s Republic and the Lugansk People’s Republic, ratified by the Federal Assembly on February 22, I made a decision to carry out a special military operation. The purpose of this operation is to protect people who, for eight years now, have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kiev [Russian spelling] regime. To this end, we will seek to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine, as well as to bring to trial those who perpetrated numerous bloody crimes against civilians, including against citizens of the Russian Federation. It is not our plan to occupy the Ukrainian territory. We do not intend to impose anything on anyone by force.... The current events have nothing to do with a desire to infringe on the interests of Ukraine and the Ukrainian people. They are connected with the defending Russia from those who have taken Ukraine hostage and are trying to use it against our country and our people.” And with those words, Russia’s war against Ukraine began.

On Saturday, marking the second anniversary of the war, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Prime Ministers Trudeau of Canada, Meloni of Italy and De Croo of Belgium participated with President Zelenskyy in a ceremony at the Wall of Remembrance in Kyiv to remember those lost in the war. Von der Leyen said, “At the Wall of Remembrance, I pay my respects to the Ukrainians who made the ultimate sacrifice fighting for our values. Freedom,

democracy, the rule of law. They are in our hearts and minds. Their legacy lives on. And it will shine through the day Ukraine wins this war.” And in her joint press conference with Zelenskyy, she said: “Today marks a grim anniversary. But it is also the moment to recognize the extraordinary power of resistance of the Ukrainian people... You, Ukrainians, have shown the world your courage, and that your fight for freedom matters. You have regained half of the land they occupied and pushed them back on the Black Sea. These are remarkable achievements, and we pay tribute to you. You who fight for the security of our entire continent. This is why you have the entire European Union behind you. More than ever, we stand firmly by Ukraine, financially, economically, militarily and most of all morally, until your country is finally free.”

As she spoke, and as the war entered its third year, the Russian forces continued their offensive operations at a number of points along the “contact line” between the forces in eastern and southeastern Ukraine. As the map below of the battlefield situation, issued Friday by British Defence Intelligence, indicates, the Russian forces continue to attack in the direction of Kupiansk in Kharkiv region in northeastern Ukraine, toward the area around the largely destroyed city of Bakhmut, toward the area around Avdiivka, a small city about ten miles north of Donetsk city from which the Ukrainians withdrew on Feb. 17, and toward the area south of Orikhiv in which the Ukrainian forces had previously taken several small towns and villages. But, as in recent weeks, the Russian forces continued to attack at other points along the “contact line” as well – most notably, toward Lyman in northern Donetsk region which is close to the industrial cities of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk; toward Marinka, a small city about ten miles west of Donetsk city; and toward the area in Kherson region in southern Ukraine where the Ukrainian forces have established a beachhead on the east bank of the Dnipro River.



Based on the daily updates on the previous day's combat engagements issued each morning by the General Staff of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, last week, from Sunday through Saturday, the Russian forces conducted 502 attacks against the Ukrainian forces defending those points along the contact line – a total of 18 in the direction of Kupiansk, 49 in the direction of Lyman, 64 in the direction of the area around Bakhmut, 79 toward the area around Avdiivka, which they took last weekend, 199 toward Marinka, 54 toward several villages and small towns taken by the Ukrainian forces south of Orikhiv, and 39 toward the Ukrainian forces just east of Kherson city in southern Ukraine. The fact that Marinka, a few miles west of Donetsk city, was by far the most frequently-attacked site last week and that, despite the fact that the Russian forces had already taken Avdiivka, the area around that city was the second most frequently-attacked site last week, reinforces the view that the immediate priority for the Russians in eastern Ukraine is to secure the area around Donetsk city, after which they will presumably attempt to take most if not all of the territory in Donetsk region they don't already hold.

Over the two years since Feb. 24, 2022, Putin's war has inflicted enormous losses of Ukrainian men, women and children from missiles, drones, planes, and artillery. Untold numbers of apartment buildings and homes, hospitals, schools, industrial plants, and utilities have been damaged or altogether destroyed. In addition, the International Organization for Migration reports that over 14 million Ukrainians have been forced to leave their homes since the war began, 6 million of whom are now refugees in Europe and almost 4 million of whom are internally displaced.

Until yesterday, Ukraine had not announced how many soldiers it has lost in the war. But yesterday, in response to media questions at the "Ukraine. Year 2024" forum in Kyiv, Zelenskyy said Ukraine has lost 31,000 soldiers in the two years since Feb. 24, 2022: "31,000 Ukrainian military personnel have been killed in this war. Not 300,000, not 150,000, not whatever Putin and his deceitful circle have been lying about. But nevertheless, each of these losses is a great sacrifice for us." He said he wouldn't disclose the number of troops who were wounded or missing. He also said "tens of thousands of civilians" had been killed in occupied areas of Ukraine but exact numbers would not be available until after the war.

The war has inflicted significant losses for Russia as well; in Saturday's Intelligence Update, British Defence Intelligence stated that Russia originally deployed approximately 130 Battalion Tactical Groups for the invasion which included approximately 1,300 tanks, over 5,000 infantry fighting vehicles and armored personnel carriers, and at least 100,000 personnel. It said that in the two years of conflict, Russian losses "match – and in many cases surpass – those that comprised its original force. Confirmed Russian losses include over 2,700 tanks and 5,000 infantry fighting vehicles and armored personnel carriers. Russia's killed and wounded are likely approximately 350,000 personnel." (Ukraine's Ministry of Defense puts the number of Russian "combat losses" – those killed or seriously wounded and removed from battle – through Saturday at 409,000.)

Notwithstanding the significant Russian losses that led, among other things, to a decision last July to raise the age for conscription for compulsory military service from 27 to 30 and to Putin's recent directive to Minister of Defense Shoigu to increase the size of the army, British Defence Intelligence nevertheless concluded, ominously for Ukraine, that "Mobilization and recruitment, production and refurbishment of existing stockpiles means that Russian losses have been replaced. Russian forces in Ukraine are now larger in number than at the start of the war. It is now able to maintain attacks along the front line and pursue a strategy of attrition against Ukrainian forces." And so, with that grim outlook, on Saturday year three of the war began.

David R. Cameron
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