

## THE WAR BETWEEN PEOPLE IN UKRAINE

ILMARI KÄIHKÖ  
BOOK REVIEWS

MARCH 21, 2018



*Kateryna Hladka, Veronika Myronova, Oleg Pokalchuk, Vasilisa Trofymovych and Artem Shevchenko, Volunteer Battalions: Story of a Heroic Deed of Battalions That Saved Ukraine (Folio, Kharkiv, 2017).*

When the so-called “little green men” made their foray into Crimea in February 2014, there was little that Ukraine’s barely established interim government could do. While everyone knew that these “polite people” were Russian special forces, Ukraine was still reeling from the Maidan revolution. President Viktor Yanukovych had fled to Russia, and the new government was opposed by parts

of the population that perceived it to be illegitimate. As Interim President Oleksandr Turchynov later admitted, “our country had neither the government system, nor the defense system back then.”

Following a fast and questionable referendum, Crimea was rapidly annexed by Russia. These events inspired a similar “Russian spring” in eastern Ukraine, which posed an even greater threat to the sovereignty of Ukrainian territory, and perhaps the existence of Ukraine itself. The massive Russian military exercises across the border only heightened the sense of threat. According to Minister of Internal Affairs Arsen Avakov, “It was totally clear that the Ukrainian Armed Forces, almost fully destroyed by the Yankovych [sic] regime, were in very poor condition, while the internal military troops and police were demoralized. There were only a couple of units actually capable of resisting the separatists.” He added, “something innovative and efficient had to be done.”

With government coffers empty and rising fires of subversion in the eastern parts of the country, Avakov advocated reaching out to patriotic citizens. “All of them could serve, but on a voluntary basis! They are motivated, they learn fast, and they don’t give in to the challenges of the first weeks ... Away with those archaic bureaucratic procedures and filters! We risked a lot, but that was the call of the times!” The minister thus largely takes credit for creating the forces that, in his telling, saved Ukraine against all odds in 2014. This forms the main narrative of *Volunteer Battalions: Story of a Heroic Deed of Battalions That Saved Ukraine*.

*Volunteer Battalions* offers a chronology of events beginning with the Maidan revolution until August 2014, when the forces of the Ukrainian Anti-Terrorist Operation were defeated in a counter-offensive of Russian regular units at Ilovaisk. Compiled in a style that became popular after *glasnost* made previously suppressed stories publishable, *Volunteer Battalions* consists of ten chapters, each of which contains a number of oral histories from an eclectic cast of characters. These range from a journalist and a historian to Avakov himself (who not only features in six chapters, but also wrote the foreword to the volume) to other top security and political elites. It is largely the voices of these participants, rather

than the pithy comments from the editors (one of whom is the head of the communications department of Avakov's ministry), that carry on the story. All this contributes to the feeling that one purpose of *Volunteer Battalions* is to bolster Avakov's political image.

Yet while *Volunteer Battalions* often reads as an official history, it nevertheless offers a unique opportunity to gain insight into the Ukrainian side of the war in Donbas, the bastion of separatism in eastern Ukraine. Too often, existing literature and thought relegates Ukraine to the role of a mere battlefield between the West and Russia. The narratives of this volume — a remarkable addition to the almost non-existent English literature on the volunteer battalions — reclaim Ukrainian agency in a war that still continues four years after it began.

The way I came to possess the original Ukrainian version of the book illustrates that there are other sides to the story of the volunteer battalions. I got my copy from a disgruntled volunteer, who had received it from Avakov at an official ceremony honoring volunteers. Wanting nothing to do with the minister or his book, the volunteer offered it to me. Like many other Ukrainians, even he had been optimistic when the revolution started. But by the fall of 2017, the revolution appeared distant. Few of the expectations of a better society had been met, and old corrupt state officials had returned to service. The absence of these kinds of critical voices exacerbates other methodological concerns, such as how the 43 interviewees were selected, and how accurate their accounts are. Also absent is any discussion about whether the histories were recorded immediately after the events or three years later. Finally, while the book focuses on the 25

volunteer formations under Avakov's ministry, it leaves out those under the Ministry of Defence (MoD), as well as the motley groups under the banner of Right Sector, which never fully submitted to government control.

*Volunteer Battalions* can be taken as an official history which seeks to bolster a certain narrative about the conflict, but a careful reading of the oral histories nevertheless adds nuance and occasionally questions this official version. This is

nevertheless asks readers and occasionally questions the official version. This is not a piece of research, but its somber story offers new dimensions to our understanding of the war in Donbas. As generals Wesley Clark and Jack Keane noted in a recent op-ed, “the Russian campaign in Ukraine is the face of future, hybrid war; and Ukraine has gained valuable experience that NATO and the U.S. are currently absorbing. This knowledge is critical for our own defense against an aggressive Kremlin.”

*Volunteer Battalions* often relies on the ambiguous moniker “hybrid war” to discuss the conflict. The nationalist claim of one of the editors that the separatist ideology is “a product of a long-lasting hybrid war[,] the active phase of which started 25 years ago” narrows the cause of the problem to a single source across Ukraine’s eastern border. While the conflict may have become one between the West and Russia, the narratives in *Volunteer Battalions* equally suggest that the separatism in the east also had domestic roots, resulting from a virtual collapse of the state. While certainly instigated by Russian propaganda, as General Ruslan Homchak, the former commander of the D-Sector of the Anti-Terrorist Operation Zone, notes, it was “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.” This was an inherently political conflict, and it would be wise to consider it the norm rather than the exception when it comes to contemporary war. In particular, three lessons stand out.

The first is just how big a threat separatism posed to the Ukrainian state. The government was largely considered powerless to react against separatist subversion, which surfaced not only in Donetsk and Luhansk, but, as *Volunteer Battalions* makes excruciatingly clear, even in Kharkiv — Ukraine’s second-largest city — and Mariupol, a strategic industrial city positioned between Russia and Crimea. The former press officer of the volunteer formations Donbas and Dnipro-1, Vasilisa Trofymovych, traces the rising tensions to the return of Yanukovich’s security officials to the east, as well as to Ukrainian officials’ inactivity and “lack of a clear-cut pro-Ukrainian position.” This is evidence of the post-Maidan polarization of Ukraine; those who had battled Maidan activists in Kyiv returned to organize anti-Maidan programs in their home

activists in Kyiv returned to organize anti-Maidan programs in their home regions in the east. As a result, the government risked losing the whole of eastern Ukraine, not Donbas alone. This support for separatism, however nascent, soon escalated into a war between people.

The second lesson of *Volunteer Battalions* derives from this idea of people's war, and concerns the conflict's domestic political dimension, especially early on. The subversive ideology of separatism was considered a disease that would spread among the generally apolitical population if left unchecked. According to Trofymovych, in Kharkiv "pro-Ukrainian activists would not allow anyone to walk along the streets ... with Russian tricolor flags, or to hold 'rallies' supporting the enemy." Further east in Donbas, unarmed people acted as human shields for armed separatists, and helped to stop and disarm demoralized Ukrainian soldiers sent to restore order. Facing a repeat of Crimea's "little green men," it was the people mobilized into volunteer battalions who became the antidote, or "little black men." Yet in Donbas the escalating violence meant that none of these groups would remain "polite" for long. This same violence later cowed some civilians into passivity, and others into taking up arms; they may not have been interested in war, but the war — as well as both Kyiv and Moscow — was interested in them.

Ukraine soon witnessed mobilization of peoples on opposing sides who held contrasting political ideas, supported by Ukraine and Russia respectively. Arising from the same context, the two sides perhaps unsurprisingly exhibited some similarities. As one volunteer battalion commander stated elsewhere, "we don't like the current government in Ukraine, and in that sense we have something in common with pro-Russia separatists." United by their lack of trust in the weak political and state structures, it was the people themselves who would have to assume responsibility for change.

Witnessing a state-in-breaking, thousands of "patriots" took it upon themselves to maintain Ukraine's territorial integrity. It should be emphasized that the initial volunteers mobilized not because of government initiatives (as Avakov suggests), but rather *despite* them; many saw the government as part of the problem, rather than the solution. Even after the Maidan revolution, the state

problem, rather than the solution. Even after the Maidan revolution, the state representatives clearly lacked legitimacy in the eyes of the more critical volunteers, many of whom had battled with internal security forces during the Maidan protests. The various accounts in *Volunteer Battalions* portray how local officials in the east were considered neutral at best or fifth columnists at worst. It hardly helped that the official view in Kyiv early on was that there was no war in the east, nor would there be one.

As suggested by Avakov's mention of "archaic bureaucratic procedures," the weakness of the Ukrainian state and its perceived unwillingness to defend Ukrainian sovereignty were combined with outdated formal, often Soviet-era practices and laws, which stopped volunteers from enlisting. As a result, even many of those willing to enlist through the army offices were left with no choice but to join the volunteer battalions. Some even left the armed forces to do so. While volunteers were plenty, it was more difficult to find the means to fight the separatists. With the state unable to provide arms before the battalions were legalized and integrated into the state security forces, the volunteers largely relied on civil society support from individuals in Ukraine and abroad. (The

Ukrainian military also took advantage of this support, which again speaks of its lack of preparation to wage war.) It is not an exaggeration to say that a nation joined together to fight for Ukraine. Some did this with arms, others with financial, material, and moral support.

The third lesson of the book concerns the nature of the war and questions of strategy in it. Western military forces are well versed in the Clausewitzian notion of war as a continuation of politics with other means. Ukraine offers a useful illustration of what this can amount to in contemporary warfare. Homchak's narrative illustrates the predicament of a military prepared to fight a war only on its own terms: "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."

The head of the presidential administration during the interim presidency describes the volunteers as a stopgap measure, which bought time for the state to “set the wheels of the rusty mechanism of the Ukraine’s Armed Forces ... in motion.” In fact, the main feat of the volunteers was likely the way they dragged the unwilling state into the conflict. By escalating the situation, they effectively influenced government aims, and hence its strategy.

This is not to say it was easy for the government to deal with the volunteers. Not only did the volunteers enjoy far more popularity than the government, the government also faced pressure in the international political arena. As the post-Maidan Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs Mykola Velychkovich notes, “everything had to and was done within the law ... Mind you, the world was watching us, and we had to prove that Ukraine wasn’t Somali [sic].” The new Ukrainian government had to maintain its international image against the constant barrage of Russian propaganda, which portrayed it as a failed state. This alone required bringing the volunteers into a legal framework by integrating them into the official force structure. *Volunteer Battalions* also admits early on that some of the volunteers committed war crimes (yet in all fairness, so did the army and the separatists, to say nothing of Russia).

As Avakov makes clear, the government was caught between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, it had to prevent any unnecessary escalation that could be exploited by Russia, which also contributed to the need to control the volunteer battalions. Yet on the other hand, the government had criminalized its opponents as terrorists, if not expelled them from the national body altogether: “if faced with armed resistance of Russian saboteurs, we had to liquidate the threat as negotiations with the terrorists were impossible and unacceptable.” This effectively made violence the only available means in a war that, because of its internationalized and political nature, could not be won through violence alone. This became apparent after the government lost its gamble with the summer offensive. Following this defeat, the government never recovered initiative.

In many ways, it is a miracle that Ukraine survived at all, a feat that the book

attributes to the men and women of the volunteer battalions. Yet while the volunteer battalions played a vital role early on in the war, few believed they could replace a professional, well-equipped force in the long run. In the end, *Volunteer Battalions* says much about contemporary warfare from the perspective of national defense against the most likely foe. As Clark and Keane suggested, it would be worthwhile to learn from these experiences paid in blood. Bearing in mind its potentially biased nature as an official history, this volume is an excellent place to start.

*Ilmari Käihkö is a visiting fellow at the Department of Anthropology, Yale University, and a post-doctoral researcher at the Department of Sociology at Uppsala University, supported by the Ryoichi Sasakawa Young Leaders Fellowship Fund (SYLFF). A veteran of the Finnish Defence Forces and specialized in the ethnographic study of armed groups, he teaches military theory at the Swedish Defence University, where he was recently nominated assistant professor. He is in the process of writing a book on strategy and the volunteer battalions, and with Jan Willem Honig on the Swedish-Finnish strategy in Afghanistan.*

Image: [Roberto Maldeno/Flickr](#)

BOOK REVIEWS

Copyright ©2019 War On The Rocks