

Clarification on Casualties

The Great Simplification

Episode 114 - NATO in Ukraine: From Proxy to Participants

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March 16, 2024

The question of casualties is complex to start with, and deliberately clouded with misinformation and outright lies from all sides. Trying to quickly make relevant points during a spontaneous, dynamic podcast type discussion is almost impossible in any reasonable time frame. Even in article length discussions it is difficult, and hits on some very sensitive issues that will trigger arguments (or more likely insults) depending on the political position of the listener. The bottom line is even if you get past the definition problem of "what do you mean by a casualty," you are left with a pile of public numbers that are not designed to inform, but to support a narrative. In short, the public information on casualties is, to be blunt, almost worthless, at best only within a factor of 4 or 5!

First, what is a casualty? Different sources use different definitions. Killed In Action (KIA) should, in theory, be a pretty obvious number. Neither side is releasing KIA numbers for themselves that are at all believable. The number estimated for the Russian side as distributed by the Ukrainians (and echoed repeatedly by the Western governments and media) are quite clearly a fantasy - they imply that the entire pre-war manpower of the Russian Army has been destroyed, which is obviously false. The numbers that the Russian MoD is estimating for Ukrainian KIA are perhaps somewhat more realistic but are totally unverified and essentially untrustworthy.

The numbers for injured are even worse. What is meant by Wounded in Action (WIA)? Permanently out of action? In the hospital for some time then returned to other duties? Treated in the field and returned to action? Double counting of someone with repeat minor injuries? So you can see how those estimates are so fuzzy as to be misleading even if you had good numbers.

So what are the public numbers? All over the place - even in the West. Try to reconcile this estimate of Russian casualties - from a **Ukrainian** source:

<https://news.yahoo.com/journalists-estimate-83-000-russian-152354736.html>

With this:

<https://www.voanews.com/a/us-official-russia-suffers-staggering-losses-despite-ukraine-s-supply-shortages/7491475.html>

Note the terminology “killed” or “killed or wounded”. What definitions, what sources, what narrative are all questions that must be asked and have few good answers.

The number analysts try to arrive at are “irretrievable losses”: the number of KIA and WIA who will not be returning to battle. The real numbers are classified by both sides as official secrets - and while likely somewhat realistic internally on the Russian side, are probably unrealistic even internally on the Ukrainian side. Just one reason I say that is that there are reliable reports that many corrupt Ukrainian commanders report killed soldiers as present in order to steal their pay, or report them as missing so as the government does not have to pay out insurance or pensions to survivors. You’ll not find these stories in the Western media, but if you explore Ukrainian run language chat rooms you’ll find frequent stories of this kind, and it appears this is not some kind of Russian disinformation campaign. At best in the West you will see stories like this:

<https://www.npr.org/2023/10/10/1204800618/how-much-progress-has-ukraine-s-government-made-against-corruption>

or

<https://globaleuronews.com/2023/09/05/france-24-ukrainian-defense-ministry-mired-in-corruption-scandals/>

which try to spin the corruption issue as a problem of the past, or under control, or at worst a problem being dealt with, none of which reflect the reality it is a systemic problem.

On the Russian side, there has been almost no official comment on Russian casualties, so it’s hard to accuse them of lying about it, but here there is an additional complication: what do you mean by “Russian Casualty?” And this hits on an extremely sensitive topic that permeates discussions of this conflict, and probably one of the more controversial aspects of the discussion: what kind of “war” is it? Although the ratios are changing, and with the formal annexation of the four Oblasti of Lugansk, Donetsk, Kherson, and Zaporizhiha the situation is even more muddled, but from the beginning it appears that the majority of the ground forces in battle in Ukraine on the “Russian” side were, using the definition of the Ukrainian government, “Ukrainians” because they were born, and lived, in oblasts that were on the Ukrainian side of the 1991 borders! This gets to the important point that while supporters of the present government of Ukraine deny it, this is in fact at its core, originally, a civil war. It has morphed into something more dangerous and complex, but that is how it started.

Again, you need look no farther than the current head of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, Colonel General Syrsky, who was born near Moscow and trained at the Command School in Moscow. His family still lives near Moscow and seems to firmly consider themselves fully "Russian." There are numerous documented instances where families are split with some serving in the Army of Ukraine, and some serving in the militias of the self-declared Donetsk and Lugansk "Peoples Republics" or even the Russian Military itself. This leads us to the heart of how you count "Russian" casualties.

Since 2014 when the war started (again, the war didn't start in February 2022, but the spring of 2014), some of these LPR/DPR units have suffered up to 50% casualties. Are these "Russian" or "Ukrainian" casualties? Ukraine wants to have it both ways: they say those areas and their people are "Ukrainian," but because they were fighting at first for independence, and now for Russia, they are "Russian" when it comes to casualties.

Depending on your perspective the few "official" Russian numbers are distorted in that they only begin to track militia casualties after those units are fully absorbed by the Russian military (an ongoing process). So when you say "Russian Casualties," again, how do you count them?

Here are two further complications: mercenaries (mostly Ukrainian side) and Private Military Contractors (mostly Russian PMCs). How are they counted, if at all? Wagner suffered a *lot* of casualties - tens of thousands, other PMCs and off the books groups have as well. On the Ukrainian side there are significant numbers of "mercenaries". Recent reports indicate some 5 to 10,000 of those are casualties. So both sides have auxiliary forces who are not counted as casualties, although the Russian side has a lot more of those. This is an important point in that Russia can claim it has fewer forces engaged than it in fact controls, which is politically important in terms of domestic support.

So what are the real numbers? Given all of the above you'd be fully justified (and a heck of a lot safer) saying "Nobody knows". It didn't really come out in the podcast, but my personal estimate is that between the LPR/DPR militias created after the 2014 revolution/coup, the active duty Russian military, PMC's, and other forces on the "Russian" side have irretrievable losses on the order of 180,000. On the Ukrainian side I suspect they are on the order of 450,000 or more. That's based on a lot of synthesis and wading through numerous reports, along with a fair dose of informed (by experience) speculation, and those are the numbers I'm using to inform my perception of how the war is going. But anyone who says they "know" the correct numbers one way or the other is either delusional or lying. Or likely both.