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USE OF RESERVISTS IN THE UKRAINIAN CONFLICT

BETWEEN MASS AND HIGH TECHNOLOGY, HARD LESSONS FOR WESTERN ARMIES

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ABSTRACT

Military lessons of the war in Ukraine are numerous and of great interest to Western armies. They affect all areas of conflict and are diverse and varied. Against this backdrop, this article looks in particular at the use of reservists by the two belligerents and seeks to draw some useful observations for our own defence models. Until the mid 2000s, the Russian and Ukrainian armed forces, both heirs to the Soviet model, had similar structures. Then these structures, and in particular the organisation, training and use of reservists diverged. The conflict that began in 2014 has accentuated these divergences, challenged the models chosen but also shown the importance of using reservists. Since 2014, but especially since 2022, both the Russians and the Ukrainians have had to adapt the way they employ their reservists in order to face the reality of war, with contrasting results. For their part, Western armies have been grappling since the end of the Cold War with the dilemma: mass or high technology? The question of this use of reservists in France and more widely in Western countries is no exception to this issue. First, this study describes the models in place and how they are evolving, then it analyses the use and results obtained by Ukrainian and Russian reservists in the context of the current conflict. Finally, in the light of these observations, this document proposes three main options for Western armies regarding the organisation and the use of their reservists.

CONTENT

Introduction	2
Two different reserve systems inherited from the Soviet model	2
The use of reservists, between additional manoeuvre capability (UAF) and regeneration force (AFRF)	9
What can Western countries learn from the conflict in Ukraine?.....	14
Conclusion	19

INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the current conflict between two conventional armies in Ukraine. The objective is to compare the military reserves of the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF) and of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (AFRF), and how they are used, in order to identify lessons and to formulate options for more effective strategies regarding the use of reservists by Western militaries.

Over the last 20-30 years, Western militaries have developed capabilities to ensure a high degree of technological dominance over their adversaries. This has shifted the focus towards increasing the use of expensive technology while reducing force mass. However, both mass and high technology are essential factors of operational superiority. Western armies are therefore faced with a dilemma: they must maintain a very high quality defence tool while being aware that there will be no victory possible without human mass.

What do the Russian approach to the war in Ukraine, and the Ukrainian response, tell us about the current structure of our own forces (Western armies)? And given the possibility that we will experience similar (high-intensity) wars in the future, what configuration would best suit our forces? From the observation of the current conflict, it appears already that neither mass nor high technology can be sacrificed. The challenge for Western nations will probably be to adjust the balance between mass and technology according to what they want to do with their defence tools and how they analyse the threat.

This paper proposes to consider a more appropriate and effective use of reservists. Here “reservists” refers to part-time soldiers whose primary employment is not with the military, and who have limited ability to be mobilized.¹ This should not be confused with a unit’s tactical reserve kept outside the battle in order to give a tactical commander freedom of action. Although their role in the conflict is not overlooked, the use of auxiliaries and private military companies is beyond the focus of this paper.

We contend that Western militaries must review how they use military reserves, which could directly impact mass. However, the effectiveness of these reservists will depend on their mobilisation, organization, training and equipment (i.e. technology).

TWO DIFFERENT RESERVE SYSTEMS INHERITED FROM THE SOVIET MODEL

As data is scarce and the culture of secrecy and misinformation is strong on both the Russian and Ukrainian sides, descriptions of their models of reservist employment must be approached with caution. Both originate from the Soviet matrix of mass and civil society involvement. The models are based on the constitution of structures and massive stocks, whose aims are to integrate reservists to create larger numbers of soldiers. Current events

1. The French definition of reservists is described in the Code de la Défense, article L4211-1 modifié par la Loi n°2018-607 du 13 juillet 2018 – art.12.

highlight weaknesses in both of the models² used by Ukraine and Russia that may be relevant to Western forces.

In Ukraine the UAF had previously attempted to build a modest yet highly qualified reserve, in line with the Western approach. But in 2014, facing the influx of volunteers following the destabilization of Donbass and the annexation of Crimea by Russia,³ they chose to territorialise their reserve in order to align more with civil society and to be able to increase the breadth of the armed forces. Subsequently, it can be assessed that the UAF chose to return to a mass-focussed military in which an increase would allow a real “Nation in arms” to be formed.

With regard to the AFRF, the difficulties encountered in 2008 by the huge Russian army in Georgia led to profound organisational reforms.⁴ This first Russian intervention since the fall of USSR revealed profound shortcomings within the AFRF. The reserve system based on mass was adapted in order to develop a framework focusing on quality and the specialisation of soldiers, with a reduced focus on their numbers. Thus, the AFRF intended to prioritise the quality of soldiers over quantity.

Of course, these objectives have never been fully achieved, leaving these two models in a more grey area than they appear here.

The Ukrainian reserve: from the Soviet model to the Scandinavian system

At the beginning of the 2000s, the Ukrainian armed forces were still very much influenced by the Soviet model from which they originated. This was based on a regular army dependent on conscription. Until 2006, Ukrainian ambitions for the reserve were numerous. All men who had served for less than 5 years had to be able to serve in the reserve.⁵ This was a “mass” way for the reserve system.

In 2006, Defence Minister Anatolii Hrytsenko noted that a smaller reserve (target of 10,000 men by 2011), composed mainly of specialists and officers, would be more effective than a mass reserve.⁶ However, the lack of political will and of funding did not allow the model to be implemented; thus in 2010, only 1,681 reservists, out of the 6,300 initially planned, were officially present within the Ukrainian armed forces.⁷

The events of 2014 caused a profound upheaval and shattered the UAF structure. Consequently, the model put in place in 2006 is now outdated. To respond to these events, the National Guard was created in order to incorporate the “volunteers” and then the

2. Mykhaylo Zabrodskyi, Jack Watling, Oleksandr V Danylyuk and Nick Reynolds, “[Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine: February–July 2022](#)”, Special Resources, November 30, 2022, p. 15.

3. GlobalSecurity.org, “[Volunteers](#)”, August 4, 2015.

4. Lester W. Grau and Charles K. Bartles, “[The Russian Way of War](#)”, Foreign Military Studies Office, 2016, p. 27.

5. GlobalSecurity.org, “[Military Reserve](#)”, March 13, 2022.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

Territorial Defence Forces (TDF) was implemented in order to strengthen the defence of the country.⁸

Quickly the UAF were incorporated battalions of “volunteers” who, firstly, should be considered as reservists in our study. These units were created following the inability of the army and the police to oppose the military occupation of Crimea and the purported secession of the Donbass in 2014. They were also the heirs of groups that formed during the Maidan events, their legitimacy based on their fight against the “Berkut” (“Special” Police units serving as anti-riot units). In 2014 they embodied a form of radical nationalism, in contrast to the regular armed forces, which were always suspected of corruption and pro-Russian sympathies. The units were founded by political activists, and the volunteers were equipped and financed by rich donors such as politicians and oligarchs.⁹ In fact, the Ukrainian government did not have the means to do this itself in 2014. The challenge for the new government was to find a legal basis for arming these militias, described by their opponents as “fascist militias”, often uncontrollable and sometimes even accused of war crimes in the Donbass. For example, in a meeting with Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk held on 8 September 2014, Amnesty International Secretary General Salil Shetty urged the Ukrainian government to stop the abuses and war crimes by volunteer battalions operating alongside regular Ukrainian armed forces.¹⁰ A solution was found with the National Guard of Ukraine under the control of the Ministry of the Interior into which these battalions were integrated. To illustrate this, the nationalist Aidar Battalion became the 24th separate assault battalion of the Ukrainian ground forces on 2 March 2015.¹¹ Therefore, the cadres of the internal security forces (whom these volunteers fought during the Maidan) would initially supervise part of these battalions. The volunteer battalions then gradually merged into the Ukrainian defence and security forces and lost their original distinctiveness.

When incorporated into the National Guard, these battalions were regularised in the sense that they were now full-time soldiers, (theoretically 60,000 men strong)¹² to carry out operations in the Donbass; for this paper, they will therefore not be considered as reservists.

In parallel to this evolution of the volunteer battalions, the UAF recreated a system of reservists in order to regain strategic “thickness”: the Territorial Defence Forces (TDF).

In 2015, General Viktor Muzhenko (Chief of the General Staff of the UAF from 2014 to 2019) continued reforms of the armed forces and set up an operational ready reserve. The aim was to reach by 2020 a volume of 230,000 members with combat experience, who had been discharged from the armed forces to reserve. This reserve would be responsible for ensuring rapid deployment in the event of an attack.¹³ This comprised two components. First, a frontline reserve, also named “reinforcement reserve”,¹⁴ composed of six brigades

8. GlobalSecurity.org, “[Volunteers](#)”, August 4, 2015.

9. Ibid.

10. Amnesty International, “[Ukraine must stop ongoing abuses and war crimes by pro-Ukrainian volunteer forces](#)”, September 8, 2014.

11. Amnesty International Briefing, Ukraine: Abuses and war crimes by the Aidar Volunteer Battalion in the north Luhansk region, EUR 50/040/2014, September 8, 2014.

12. GlobalSecurity.org, “[Volunteers](#)”, August 4, 2015.

13. Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, “[White book 2019 – 2020](#)”, 2021, p. 83.

14. Ibid., p. 83.

(two infantry brigades, two armoured brigades, two artillery brigades). These reservists carry out around thirty days of training per year and are immediately employable within the active manoeuvre corps. These units are fully integrated into the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Equipped like the active units, these brigades have to be mobilised very quickly to reinforce the Ukrainian battle corps alongside regular units. Second, a second-line reserve, also called “territorial reserve”¹⁵ or Territorial Defence Forces (TDF), composed of 25 to 28 territorial brigades. These units are staffed by former active soldiers and reservists who have acquired a great deal of experience in the Donbass since 2014.¹⁶ Each brigade is supported by a region (*oblast'*). These territorial brigades are responsible for incorporating civilians who have no military experience. Created in May 2014, these regional units are overseen by a double authority. They are employed by the Chief of Staff of the Army, but are recruited and equipped by the governors of each region (*oblast'*) to which the respective brigade is attached. Thus, it is the *Oblast Military Enlistment Offices* that finance and organise these units. The law “On fundamentals of national resistance” enacted in July 2021, has set itself the task of “protect(ing) the rear area and timely response while taking measures to defend territories”.¹⁷ This law establishes that from peacetime, a core of 10,000 contracted soldiers would form the command posts of these units, which would then be armed by reservists.

The Ukraine’s TDF can be further subdivided into three components: Territorial brigades, the National Resistance movement (training of saboteurs, Tactical Air Controller, partisans, etc., in conjunction with the special forces and special services of the UAF acting in territories occupied by Russian forces) and the “training” of citizens organised in conjunction with the regions (*oblasti*).¹⁸

Command of the territorial brigades is devolved to four regional headquarters: Operational Command North, East, South and West. At the time of the 2022 invasion, the TDF was in the process of training its core of 10,000 professional soldiers.¹⁹ This figure increased to 110,000 in May 2022 after the general mobilisation decreed by President Zelensky. The purpose of the territorial units is to defend the vital points of interest in their region (*oblast'*) before being redeployed on the front line. Currently, according to General Sobko, Chief of Staff of the TDF, in May 2022, 25 territorial brigades had participated in clashes against the Russians, mainly outside their home region (*oblast'*).²⁰

This Ukrainian reserve model had to face the reality of war and respond to the need for citizen engagement. This particular model has suffered two major shocks that have profoundly altered its structure. In 2014, facing the attack on Ukrainian territory, the Ukrainian reserve units allowed the incorporation of volunteers, and embodied a kind of national vanguard of resistance. In 2022, the reserve units were further transformed, this time to provide

15. Ibid., p. 83.

16. Congressional research service (CRS), “[Ukrainian Military Performance](#)”, November 3, 2022.

17. Mykola Bielieskov, “[Ukraine’s Territorial Defence Forces: The War So Far and Future Prospects](#)”, Commentary, May 11, 2023, RUSI.

18. French Military sources.

19. Ibid.

20. “[U boâh na fronti berut’ učas’ 25 iz 32 brigad teroboroni](#)” (25 out of 32 brigades of the Territorial Defense are taking part in combat operation on the front), *Ukrinform*, May 18, 2022, in Ukrainian.

a structure for the mobilization of combat commitment of the whole society.²¹ Faced with the events, the Ukrainian reserve model was adapted and transformed, and was successful in enabling the whole nation to engage in the fight.

The Russian reserve: thirty years of trial and evolution

Describing and mapping the AFRF reserve system is a challenge because of the lack of reliable information that would ensure a correlation between official texts and reality. For example, it is difficult to establish the exact number of reservists in Russia. Moreover, since the end of the Soviet era, the AFRF reserve system has undergone many changes and reforms including, recently, the creation of the Special Army Combat Reserve (BARS, which means “Leopard”)²² in 2021.²³

The Soviet Union had previously relied on a large strategic reserve of troops, composed of conscripts and officers who had completed their mandatory service and had been discharged. As part of their mass mobilization doctrine, active-duty cadres regularly maintained the units’ equipment. The intention was that this large strategic reserve of troops and equipment would be mobilized in response to large-scale warfare, such as against NATO forces. After the collapse of the Soviet system, the economic difficulties of the Russian Federation and the operating cost of these reserve units have gradually had an impact on the ability of the operational units to maintain their operational readiness.²⁴

However, after the difficulties encountered during the Russian-Georgian war of 2008, the Russian Federation Ministry of Defence led the “New Look” reform the following year.²⁵ The structural reforms that followed aimed to professionalize the armed forces and increase the availability and operational capacity of the regular AFRF. This was done at the expense of mass, with more professional soldiers and fewer reservists.²⁶ One consequence was that many of the reserve units were disbanded by focusing on a smaller but fully operational reserve rather than on a bigger but strategic one.²⁷ However, tensions within the AFRF²⁸ between conservatives and reformers led to two reserve models, with a strategic reserve in case of mass mobilization, in addition to a smaller more operational reserve.

The operational reserve experimented with two different structures. On the one hand, the Individual Ready Reserve, which is similar to the US reserve system, was created, composed of first active resources (*lûdskoj*), formed by officers, non-commissioned officers and enlisted soldiers, but also by conscripts still in military service. All are part of the mobilization reserve and can be mobilized immediately. Second, it is also composed of inactive reserve components, made

21. French Military sources.

22. In Russian: Boevoy Armejskij Reserv Strany.

23. GlobalSecurity.org, “[BARS Special Combat Army Reserve](#)”, November 3, 2022.

24. Lester W. Grau and Charles K. Bartles, “[The Russian Way of War](#)”, Foreign Military Studies Office, 2016, p.14.

25. Mohammed Komat, “[La capacité militaire de la Russie en 2022](#)”, Big decision, February 13, 2022.

26. Swedish Research defence Agency (FOI), “[Russian Military capability in a ten-year perspective](#)”, December 2019.

27. Sam Cranny-Evans, “[Understanding Russia’s Mobilisation](#)”, Commentary, September 28, 2022, RUSI.

28. Lester W. Grau and Charles K. Bartles, “[The Russian Way of War](#)”, Foreign Military Studies Office, 2016, p. 15.

up of veterans of previous conflicts, military personnel who have left active service, together with former conscripts who have signed a reserve contract. All are considered as voluntary reservists, and they are part of the mobilization reserve.²⁹ This operational reserve would be drawn from volunteers who would receive a monthly salary, and would commit to two-weeks of annual training. These reserve units would be interoperable with professional units.

On the other hand, light infantry units referred to as territorial-defence battalions (BTO) were also created, similar to those in Ukraine. These units would secure critical infrastructure to the rear of the battle space. They would not be equipped or trained for high-intensity combat, as their purpose was to relieve professional units so that the latter could concentrate their efforts on the combat area.

Then, the creation of a voluntary military reserve was announced in 2014,³⁰ whereby a small reserve system was experimented with at region level. Further adjustments were made to the organisation in 2016, and by 2018 a “mobilisation reserve”³¹ was finally established. This was open to former active military personnel who received a small salary. In return, volunteers were required to attend monthly training sessions and to participate in annual exercises lasting 20 to 30 days.³² However, this system required high levels of volunteer availability to mitigate personnel shortages in active units or to join in major exercises.

The mobilisation reserve further evolved in 2021 following the establishment of the Special Combat Army Reserve (BARS³³). While documented evidence of the formation of these units is not apparent, traces of this programme can be found on the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation’s website.³⁴ The recruitment target of 100,000 fighters, including 38,000 fighters solely for the southern military district was set to serve as an experimental platform.³⁵ While geographically this represents the smallest district in Russia, it is however located on the Ukrainian border and includes Crimea. The purpose of this reserve is to recruit volunteer citizens contracted to the Ministry of Defence who are kept in a high state of readiness. Volunteers are recruited for a unit with a designated rank and function. Like the previously outlined model, BARS is organised by dedicated training periods.

Training plans for reservists would include a monthly 2-3 day sequence and an annual 20 day training session. The goal is to train reservists specifically for the positions they are expected to take in the event of mobilization. Another feature of the BARS Special Army Combat Reserve is that, similar to Western reserve models, it is possible to combine reserve and civilian work where the State provides an allowance for employers to compensate for reservists’ absence. This differentiates it from the 2018 system. The offer is attractive for the volunteers thanks to the monthly salary, the access to qualified medical care and the guarantee to serve with modern equipment; participating could also facilitate recruitment for those interested in a career as an officer in the active army. Finally, recruitment in the

29. Ibid., p. 16.

30. Sam Cranny-Evans, “[Understanding Russia’s Mobilisation](#)”, Commentary, September 28, 2022, RUSI.

31. “[V Rezerv po kontraktu](#)” (Entering the reserve on contract), *Izvestiâ*, February 13, 2018, in Russian.

32. Chuck Bartles, “[Russia’s BARS reserve system takes shape](#)”, U.S. Army Foreign Military Studies Office, April 1st, 2022.

33. GlobalSecurity.org, “[BARS Special Combat Army Reserve](#)”, November 3, 2022.

34. BARS official recruitment site: <http://bars2021.tilda.ws/>.

35. [BARS: Voennaâ služba na polstavki](#) (BARS: Part time military service), *Zvezda*, September 7, 2021, in Russian.

BARS would cater for those who have recently been discharged into the reserve and have not yet lost their army skills.³⁶

It is worth noting the influential role of the military commissioners as they intervene in both phases of the mobilization of the reservists. In peacetime, they are responsible for organizing the training of reservists as well as conscripts, or for listing the equipment available and usable in case of mobilization. During the mobilization phase, they are responsible for gathering, convening, and ensuring the presence of the relevant citizens, and then providing them with their equipment at assembly points.

The chaotic evolution of the Russian reserve demonstrates a certain post-Cold War failure to choose a system capable of serving a precise strategy. As shown later in this paper, this perhaps indicates the difficulties encountered by Russia during the Ukrainian conflict when it was necessary to regenerate part of its forces. It is important to note, however, that the profile of AFRF reservists is different in many ways from many Western armies' reservists. Most of the AFRF reservists have previous military experience (former active military, former conscripts...), while some even have combat experience.

The events of the last twenty years have profoundly disrupted the organisational models of the reserves on both sides. The reforms implemented were far from complete when the Russian offensive actions of February 2022 began, and would be tested by the hazards of war. It is nevertheless particularly interesting to see how the structures and people adapted, the results obtained and lessons to be learned by Western armies.

Figure: comparative table of reserve systems

	Model	Manpower	Training	Efficiency
Ukraine	2006-2014 reserve model	Limited resources	High level of training	High level of manoeuvrability (integration with active forces)
	Territorial defence units	Between 25 and 28 brigades (1 per region [<i>oblast'</i>])	- Light infantry units - Limited training	Progressive scaling up during the conflict
	Front line reserve units	Six combat brigades	- Good level of training - Interoperable with professional units	Successfully employed in the manoeuvre units of the battle corps
Russia	Individual ready reserve	Permanent active military plus inactive reserve component	- Volunteers with military background - Two weeks annual training	Interoperable with professional units
	Territorial defence battalion (BTO)	Similar to the Ukrainian territorial defence	Not equipped or trained for high intensity combats	Dedicated to secure critical infrastructure in the rear area
	BARS	Aim : 100,000 volunteers	- Monthly and annual training periods - Equipped as professional units	Supposed to be kept in a high state of readiness

36. GlobalSecurity.org, "[BARS Special Combat Army Reserve](#)", November 3, 2022.

THE USE OF RESERVISTS, BETWEEN ADDITIONAL MANOEUVRE CAPABILITY (UAF) AND REGENERATION FORCE (AFRF)

The military occupation of Crimea and the war in the Donbass in 2014 are indirectly the points of differentiation for the Russian and Ukrainian reserve models. This is represented by the involvement of the civilian population in this latest (2022 – present) war. On the one hand, the Kremlin is making efforts to keep the civilian population away from the conflict in order to maintain national support; on the other hand, the entire Ukrainian nation is involved in the defence of its territory against the invader. This has resulted in very different strategies for the use of reservists.

Despite fundamental shortcomings such as a lack of equipment and poor training, the Ukrainian reservists have boosted the UAF with decisive manoeuvre capabilities, some having played a vital role in stopping the Russian offensive on the Northern Front. Though poorly equipped, these battalions formed the mass against the Russian offensive and then increased in strength as the conflict progressed.

Notwithstanding the lack of tangible evidence regarding the Russian establishment and their use or resources, it can be assumed that Russian reservists were also engaged from the beginning of the 2022 invasion, but without constituting a fully-fledged manoeuvre capability. As for the troops initially deployed following the partial mobilisation on 21 September 2022, the use of reservists should be considered more as a poorly equipped and trained regeneration force.

Ukrainian reservists: the right balance between mass, experience and advanced technology?

It can be assumed that Ukrainian reservists were key factors in Ukraine's ability to absorb the shock of the offensive of 2022 and not collapse at the beginning of the current fighting. It was the reservists who gave the UAF the density needed to continue the war.

It is important to note that the theoretically established reserve model could not be fully implemented, and that events disrupted the use of the reserve unit model. There are several factors worth highlighting regarding the practical use of reserve units.

Valuable lessons were learned from the organisation system of the territorial brigades. Long before the 2022 offensive, each region (*oblast*) set up recruitment offices within their administrative structures, as well as a network of recall centres responsible for rapidly absorbing the flow of volunteers and reservists joining the armed forces. This network, based on the administrative authorities, provided a strong and close link with the whole of civil society, which helped citizens to actively engage in service should they wish to do so. It could potentially have been detrimental to the national "fighting spirit" if those wishing to enlist had not been able to do so because of military structures saturated by the

number of volunteers. This ability to attract and deploy a considerable mass of volunteers has proved a very successful initiative for the UAF.

Conversely, when the 2022 Russian offensive was launched, the Territorial Defence Forces were not ready. This has often been evident since the 2014 war began in the Donbass. The human, material and financial needs of the professional units have been enormous since the beginning of the 2014 war, and up until 2022, reservists were not a priority. Consequently, though the structures exist, the men have not been appropriately trained or equipped. When the offensive began, the TDF were still in the process of training and equipping their core of 10,000 professionals. They lacked basic training, communication equipment, individual protection or vehicles.³⁷

Nevertheless, even if these units were not necessarily fully suitable for integration into the Ukrainian manoeuvre corps, they still facilitated the UAF in facing the offensive. While the brigades formed in the regions (*oblasti*) behind the front were conducting operations to protect the rear zone, the TDF in the border regions were directly engaged in high-intensity combat.³⁸ Indeed, TDF were essential for successfully opposing the Russian offensive on the northern front towards Kyiv, but also in the region of Soumy, Tchernihiv, Kharkiv, Louhansk, Donestk, Zaporijia and Mykolayiv.³⁹ This ability to mobilize the population quickly, and the resilience of the reservists, most likely surprised the Russian strategists whose wrong assessment of the mass of Ukrainian reservists employable in the UAF battle corps should be considered an important factor in the Russian failure.

Nevertheless, the effective military structure that is well integrated into civil society is not without its drawbacks. It has negatively impacted the synchronisation of chains of command.⁴⁰ At the end of 2021, the TDF did not have a single integrated operational chain of command – they depended on the Interior Ministry and above all, on the respective regions (*oblasti*) to which they were attached. The unification of the command of the territorial brigades under the orders of the UAF chief of staff was scheduled to be completed in January 2022, just before the Russian offensive, which didn't allow for chains of command to become fully established. At the beginning of the offensive, liaison and coordination with professional units were less than ideal. This slowed down the ability of the UAF to coordinate the reservist units which were then *de facto* employed in an autonomous and decentralised manner in the field. While this provided great flexibility and resilience to Ukrainian units in defence, such freedom of action was ineffective in concentrating efforts needed to resume the offensive. It took several months before Ukrainian reservist units could become fully integrated into the UAF manoeuvre plan. This is an important lesson for Western armies on the command and control chain.

Valuable lessons can also be learned on a tactical level. First, the challenge for the professional army was to hold the front while waiting for the arrival of reservist units. In the

37. Ruslan Khomchak "[The budget for 2022 envisages almost 3,1 billion hryvnias for the formation of the Territorial Defence Forces](#)," National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine, February 21, 2022.

38. Mykola Bieliesskov, "[Ukraine's Territorial Defence Forces: The War So Far and Future Prospects](#)", Commentary, 11 May 2023, RUSI.

39. Ibid.

40. French military sources.

initial months of the 2022 Russian offensive, the Ukrainian professional units were fixed in the Donbass; facing a multidirectional offensive the army had to prioritise the use of professionals. Even if they were not fully operational, reservist units were engaged on the front to offer sufficient breadth to the UAF: they fulfilled the need for mass. The strength of the TDF lies firstly in its ability to be engaged immediately in high-intensity combat, and secondly in its great capacity to adapt and learn as events unfold. For instance, a six-week captain specific course was introduced in November 2022 demonstrating the responsiveness of the TDF.⁴¹

A key strength of the mobilisation of Ukrainian reservists is the commanders' ability to draw on the civilian resources of these new combatants, allowing innovative and diverse initiatives within the tactical echelons. Individuals are bringing skills, observations, perspectives, and resources that would not traditionally have been available within military structures. As a result, the presence of reservists and the autonomy they are allowed to exercise, enable strong links between civil society and the army.

As an illustration, there are NGOs responsible for developing and installing software for calculating artillery fire on tablets and distributing these to the troops.⁴² The subsidiarity and autonomy left to the tactical echelons (either deliberately or due to the vagaries of war) is also an asset for Ukrainian reservists. In other words, there is value in not forcing reservists to rigidly comply with the regular systems. Civilian advanced technology encounters mass, and compounds the effects produced.

It can therefore be said that the UAF have chosen to prioritise mass in the first instance, followed by a focus on quality. Initially, the numbers of volunteers within the reservist units were quickly increased and the units were deployed once they were ready to reinforce the Ukrainian battle corps and face the Russian offensive. It appears that this was a sensible strategy as the reservists and volunteers enabled the UAF to avoid collapsing and to absorb the first waves of the offensive.

In a second phase, once the situation had stabilised and was helped by western countries, the UAF opted for human and material advanced technology. Ukrainian units were then trained and equipped to western standards. The new battalions thus formed made it possible to almost completely regenerate an active army exhausted by the initial months of the offensive, and then to successfully counterattack from September 2022.

Russian reservists in Ukraine, a regeneration capacity before being a mass factor

While the fighting has been going on for over a year now, it is still difficult to fully evaluate the impact of the Russian army's use of reservists in Ukraine. This is due to Russia's campaign of strategic messaging and tailored information.⁴³ The propaganda campaign

41. Mykola Bielieskov, "[Ukraine's Territorial Defence Forces: The War So Far and Future Prospects](#)", Commentary, May 11, 2023, RUSI.

42. Hubert Migeot, "[L'innovation technologique au service de la résistance ukrainienne](#)", *L'Illustré*, June 27, 2022.

43. IRSEM, "[La guerre informationnelle de la Russie](#)", *Le collimateur*, March 28, 2023.

appears to be taking a deceptive approach to the management of information related to the military's involvement and objectives in the campaign, such as how the Kremlin refers to the conflict as a "special operation" rather than a war. This is a seminal point, as special operations have different legal ramifications for Russia's ability to mobilize forces than if they had declared war. Moreover, a semantic blur persists, as the terms "conscription", "mobilization" and "reserve" can be used interchangeably in common language, which leads to confusion. Consequently, the following study will focus particularly on the partial mobilization declared on 21 September 2022 by President Putin.

From the beginning of the offensive, reservists were mobilized and sent directly to the front line alongside professional soldiers, although it is difficult to accurately estimate the number of reservists who were mobilized. In order to maintain freedom of action, Russian civil society was initially kept in ignorance of the conflict by the government. This contributes to use of the term "special operation" rather than "war".⁴⁴ The Kremlin avoided recourse to martial law or a general mobilization, measures which could have proven unpopular by many at the beginning of the conflict. This approach also assumes that the Russian military authorities would enjoy a rapid victory over the UAF.⁴⁵

However, six months after the beginning of the Russian offensive, the situation had not reached its objectives. On the contrary, the Russian army, with the support of its auxiliaries, had not exploited a balance of power that had initially weighed in their favour, while also suffering considerable losses.⁴⁶ The Ukrainian counter-offensive in the North and the very heavy Russian losses have created real panic in the Moscow staffs. To compensate for that, the Russian army has focussed on improving its capacity to regenerate. Age limits (recruitment and end of service) were extended, and recruitment campaigns were conducted in prisons (the Wagner Private Military Company recruited about 40,000 men from the penal colonies). However, these measures were insufficient as the spring conscription only netted 20 to 30% of those called up.⁴⁷

In this situation mobilization appeared to be the worst-case scenario, and on 21 September 2022, a declaration of a partial mobilization was issued, calling up an additional 300,000 Russians. The same day, Putin declared in a statement that "military service will apply only to citizens who are currently in the reserve, especially those who have served in the armed forces, have certain military professions and relevant experience".⁴⁸ It is difficult to determine whether or not these reservists belonged to the constituted units described above, as there is no mention of a territorial defence or operational reserve. We can simply state that they are Russian citizens with "previous military experience", as specified by Sergei Shoigu.⁴⁹ In particular, the declaration underlines that the skills sought were

44. Dimitri Minic, "[Vladimir Poutine signe un décret visant à agrandir l'armée russe](#)", IFRI, August 26, 2022.

45. Mykhaylo Zabrodskyi, Jack Watling, Oleksandr V Danylyuk and Nick Reynolds, "[Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: February](#)", RUSI special report, November 30, 2022.

46. Ibid.

47. Dimitri Minic, "[Vladimir Poutine signe un décret visant à agrandir l'armée russe](#)", IFRI, August 26, 2022.

48. Pjotr Sauer, "[Putin announces partial mobilisation and threatens nuclear retaliation in escalation of Ukraine war](#)", *The Guardian*, September 21, 2022.

49. Ibid.

as drivers, artillerymen and gunners, while outlining the conditions for exemption from mobilization, and the vague promise of quotas by region.⁵⁰

In order to form a more holistic view of the Russian reserve capacity, it is also important to have an understanding of the Russian conscription model and why the partial mobilization process was conducted over a limited period of time, between September 21 and October 28, 2022.⁵¹ The Russian system implements a biannual conscription resulting in a one-year compulsory military service for all males aged 18 to 27. Conscripts are called up in two sessions: the spring call-up and the autumn call-up. The military commissariats played a major role in this process as they were responsible for assigning conscripts to units and tasks. Since the military commissioners were also in charge of the partial mobilization, it is understandable that the latter was limited in time to avoid disrupting the autumn conscription. Another more operational explanation also appears to justify this limited duration of partial mobilization: by completing the troop raising at the end of October, the AFRF had two to three months to prepare the supposed January offensives.

Initial analysis of this partial mobilization shows that some of the reservists were very quickly sent to the front. Some specialists speak of 80,000 mobilized people sent directly to the Donbass, including 40,000 on the front line.⁵² Reports from the mobilization show that the soldiers were very poorly equipped and that those sent to the front were not operational. According to some media reports, the first wave of mobilized soldiers had only one day of training, which resulted in an increase in friendly-fire incidents. This rapid commitment of reservists reflects an absolute necessity to regenerate the troops in contact, while also significantly reducing the mass of the freshly formed reserve. Such rapid use of Russian reservists can therefore be assessed as ineffective in turning the tide of the war. Yet it allowed the AFRF to hold ground and gave some respite to the regular forces who had been in combat for many months, buying enough time for the remainder of those mobilised to be trained so they would be more useful. This is reflected in a publication of the British Ministry of Defence in a post published on November 25, 2022,⁵³ which states that the use of reservists is characterized by “inadequate training and personal equipment, and commitment to highly attritional combat missions”. It further states that “mobilised reservists have highly likely experienced particularly heavy casualties after being committed to dig ambitious trench systems while under artillery fire around the Luhansk region (*oblast'*) town of Svatovo” or that “In Donetsk region (*oblast'*), reservists have been killed in large numbers in frontal assaults into well-established Ukrainian defensive zones around the town of Bakhmut”.

It is difficult at this point to draw entirely accurate conclusions about the use of the mass generated by the partial Russian mobilization, mainly because the declaration provides for the use of mobilized troops as of January 2023. This suggests a delay of at least two months

50. Sam Cranny-Evans, “[Understanding Russia’s Mobilisation](#)”, Commentary, September 28, 2022, RUSI.

51. Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation; “[Russian Defense Minister Shoigu tells Putin mobilization is complete](#),” *Meduza*, October 28, 2022.

52. These figures could not be verified with precision.

53. UK Ministry of Defence, “[Latest Defence Intelligence update on the situation in Ukraine - 25 November 2022](#)”, November 25, 2022.

to prepare and train the mobilized forces. Above all, the war in Ukraine has shown that the AFRF reserve was not an operational force that could be directly exploited as soon as mobilization began. This can be corroborated by the numerous open source videos available showing Russian soldiers complaining about conditions, equipment and insufficient training after being mobilized. Several notable points are recurrent: incomplete equipment distribution; personal purchase of additional equipment; sloppy or non-existent training; incompetent cadres; partial or non-payment of pay; poor or inexistent infrastructure.

A poorly equipped (i.e. in technology) and poorly trained mass is therefore ineffective, even when the force ratio is in its favour. Thus at the beginning of the conflict, with a 12:1 force ratio on the Gomel axis, the AFRF failed to achieve their objective.⁵⁴

It will be understood that everything opposes Ukraine and Russia in their strategy of using reservists simply because the place given to the conflict differs in each of the two nations: Ukraine has sought to involve as many of its citizens as possible, whereas Russia has sought to preserve civil society.

A true reservoir of strength, reservists contribute to the density of an army by being used in formed units. Their long-term effectiveness will depend on their ability to quickly increase their strength. Therefore, the challenge is to bring them up to the level of professional units, which cannot be done without training or a minimum of appropriate technology. It now remains to be seen how these various models for reservists could be applied by Western armies.

WHAT CAN WESTERN COUNTRIES LEARN FROM THE CONFLICT IN UKRAINE?

Having presented the models of the reserves and the doctrines used by both the UAF and the AFRF, it is obvious that the manner in which reservists are mobilized and deployed in the conflict relies on different strategies. Ukraine has defended its own territory against an army which is apparently superior in numbers and technology; in contrast, Russia had intended to engage initially in a 10-day “special operation”, presumably with the hope of completing the mission without involving its own population.

This conflict is an opportunity to outline several options regarding the use of reservists by other nations. For example, France has set a goal of “having one reserve soldier for every two active soldiers. In other words, 100,000 reservists for an active army of 200,000 men”.⁵⁵ This goal was presented by the Minister of the Armed Forces, Mr. Sébastien Lecornu, during a working group on 21 November 2022 preparing the military programming law for 2024-2030.⁵⁶ The French President, Emmanuel Macron, confirmed the objective in his

54. Mykhaylo Zabrodskyi, Jack Watling, Oleksandr V Danylyuk and Nick Reynolds, “[Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine: February](#)”, RUSI special report, November 30, 2022, p. 1.

55. Ministère des armées, “[LPM 2024-2030 : objectif 100 000 réservistes](#)”, November 22, 2022.

56. Press release of the French Ministry of Defense, [Première réunion du groupe de travail sur l’avenir de la réserve militaire](#), November 22, 2022.

address to the armed forces on January 20, 2023.⁵⁷ The following options are based on the lessons previously learned, combined with national defence strategies. The decision was therefore made not to take a conscription model approach within Western armies where a threat on national territory is not direct. Such is the case for France, the United Kingdom, and Germany. Moreover, the options will be analysed taking into account their impact on mass and technology, as well as maintaining an appropriate balance between each of these two factors.

Option 1. A highly trained and equipped operational reserve as a regeneration force

From the very first engagements in a high-intensity conflict, both the UAF and the AFRF suffered heavy losses that are difficult to estimate.⁵⁸ Thus, at the beginning of June, only two and a half months after the offensive, the daily losses claimed by President Zelenski were assessed at about 60 to 100 dead and 500 wounded. On the Russian side, it was estimated over the entire period to June that between 30,000 and 35,000 soldiers had been put out of action (dead, wounded, deserters), i.e. about 15% of the forces engaged at the beginning of the war.⁵⁹ To compensate for some of these losses, both sides have outlined several reserve units dedicated to the regeneration of forces in their army models. While both doctrines had previously outlined reserves, appropriate amendments were made as the Ukrainian focus is on the so-called “operational ready reserve,”⁶⁰ while the Russian focus relates to the “Special Combat Army Reserve” (BARS).⁶¹ The military experience of their members combined with their regular training ensure these units will have a high level of integration with professional units. This should allow for a rapid deployment of reinforcement or regeneration forces.

In order to have the ability to regenerate or reinforce operational forces, the first option would be to set up a highly trained and equipped operational reserve, directly integrated within combat units. This would require an upgrade of current operational reserve units, most often assimilated to light infantry, to competently operate the parent unit’s major equipment. These units would therefore be at company level and would be capable of high-intensity combat, due in particular to a very high level of combined arms integration. As an example, a reserve unit of a cavalry regiment would adapt its structure to be able to operate main battle tanks as well as reconnaissance vehicles. The desire to keep these units under the command and control of professional regiments would require appropriate levels of knowledge sharing, interoperability and optimization of equipment sustainability. The professional regiments would therefore be responsible for the training and the

57. Elysée, “[Transformer nos armées : le Président de la République présente le nouveau projet de loi de programmation militaire](#)”, January 20, 2023.

58. Dimitri Minic, “[Vladimir Poutine signe un décret visant à agrandir l’armée russe](#)”, IFRI, August 26, 2022; Dan Peleschuk, “[Counting central Ukraine’s military losses, with a spreadsheet](#)”, Reuters, June 8, 2023.

59. Dimitri Minic, “[L’armée ukrainienne va monter en puissance au fil des mois](#)”, IFRI, June 8, 2022.

60. Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, “[White book 2019 – 2020](#)”, 2021– The armed forces of Ukraine and the special transport service.

61. Sam Cranny-Evans, “[Understanding Russia’s Mobilisation](#)”, Commentary, 28 September 2022, RUSI.

operational preparation of their reserve unit. This elementary unit, directly subordinated to the battalion commander, would be composed solely of reservists who would benefit from the direct support of regimental specialists.

Within their regiment, these units must have their own infrastructure in addition to their own equipment (individual weapons, transmissions, optronics...). As the availability of heavy equipment is the main limitation of this model, an alternative could be explored, but it would directly affect interoperability with professional units. The example of the French Army, which is gradually integrating its 4th generation weapons programme SCORPION, can be considered in this instance. Unless major efforts are made to increase the reserve's ability to fully align with the professional units, a possible solution would be to train reserve units as a priority on 3rd generation equipment, in order to accompany their gradual withdrawal from service, and then train them on SCORPION.

With a view to optimizing human and equipment potential, the priority goal of these "combined reserve units" would be to integrate former active military personnel with experience on the major equipment. This would primarily mean optimizing experience at the expense of local recruitment. The units could be built up gradually, platoon by platoon, to ensure a progressive transition that would not strain the availability of reservists.

Operational readiness of reserve units would be the responsibility of their regiment. Moreover, once trained, these units could naturally participate in all the regiment's training exercises and evaluations. Before eventually being deployed in operation, reserve units would be required to reach a minimum operational standard, similar to the regular units.

Finally, the main limitation of this model is the equipment, i.e. the technology. This option would therefore not allow for an increase in manoeuvre capability, i.e. mass, since its primary objective is to maintain the combat potential of the units already engaged. In the context of a will to increase the volume of reserves, this option could not apply to all reservists and could therefore be combined with one of the options that follows.

Option 2. An operational reserve designed as a manoeuvre of mass

The strength of the Ukrainian reserve has been its ability to engage as a manoeuvre force on the front line quickly and on a parity with active units. The six Ukrainian "reinforcement reserve" brigades on the front line thus offered mass and breadth to the UAF. For instance, reserve units absorbed the initial shocks of the Russian offensive in the northern regions.⁶² This ability of the reserve to manoeuvre and massively increase the Ukrainian battle corps was a major asset of the Ukrainian defensive capability. The possible underestimation of the combat potential of these units (especially the six manoeuvre brigades) by Russian intelligence was a major cause of the failure of their northern offensive. The Ukrainian reserve units were first created with a specific chain of command similar to that of the active UAF units. After the start of the Russian offensive and from the very begin-

62. Mykola Bielieskov, "[Ukraine's Territorial Defence Forces: The War So Far and Future Prospects](#)", Commentary, May 11, 2023, RUSI.

ning of the fighting, both the first line reserve units (manoeuvre units) and the second line reserve units (Territorial Defence Forces) were placed under the sole command of the UAF Chief of Staff.⁶³

The second option would be to build a reserve capable of providing a manoeuvre of mass at short notice to support, relieve or reinforce active units. Contrary to the first option, these units must be capable of engaging autonomously while having a chain of command integrated, from peacetime, into the active army's battle corps. Reserve units must therefore go beyond the level of the elementary unit integrated into active battalions and be conceived as autonomous manoeuvre forces. The battalion level seems to be adapted to this model. Specialized support, signal support and command post must remain active units. In the case of the French army, for instance, each combat brigade could constitute a complete regiment of reservists. This reserve infantry regiment would be fully integrated into the brigade's battle corps.

Each active brigade would be responsible for equipping, training and supporting its reserve infantry battalion which would mirror the structure of the active ones. Some key positions may be staffed by active-duty personnel, but the general principle is the autonomy of this unit. In the event of mobilization and after its warm-up phase, the unit must be available for use by the brigade commander just as all other infantry battalions in its brigade. This battalion should have a self-contained barracks and command post to quickly ramp up in the event of mobilization. Signals, weapons, vehicles, and equipment for the brigade reserve battalion should be present and stored at the location of this battalion.

This reserve could be constituted around an Operational Reserve Level 1 (OR1) – civilians undergoing regular training - and a few active-duty cadres occupying specific positions. The Operational Reserve Level 2 (OR2) – recalled former active military personnel – would only be a back-up resource to complete the strength of this battalion. To cater for a degree of flexibility (like option n°3, below), the recruitment of these reservists could be regional, based on the headquarters of the brigade. National complements for specific reservists occupying technical or command positions could be envisaged. The recruitment and HR management of this battalion would be exclusive to the brigade; priority must be given to the human resources of the command and management positions. The capacity to increase management must be considered to absorb a possible massive influx of volunteers caused by conflict.

The training and deployment of the reserve battalion should be under the exclusive responsibility of the employing brigade. Moreover, the reserve battalion would be an infantry unit adapted to the characteristics of its brigade (light, armoured, airborne, mountain or amphibious). The training of officers and non-commissioned officers would be carried out in the same schools and according to the same curricula as for active-duty militaries, even if the duration of this training must be adapted. Reserve infantry battalions must be evaluated in the same way as active units (but the criteria can be adapted). These reserve units must be trained to the same standards as their active counterparts. The reserve battalion

63. French military sources.

must be capable of performing basic offensive and defensive infantry missions. Finally, this would be a contact manoeuvre unit capable of performing the missions intrinsic to professional fighting troops. This option, like the others, does not necessarily exclude the recruitment of specialist reservists in dedicated units (Cyber, UAV, intelligence), for their background and skills.

Option 3. A territorialized reserve serving the defence of the Nation

While the six first-line reserve brigades were very quickly engaged in the UAF manoeuvre corps, the 25 second-line reserve brigades (Territorial Defence Forces) were assigned to the defence in depth of the Ukrainian national territory.⁶⁴ The lessons learned from the use of these units are threefold: first, the organization of the territorial defence is based on the civil organization of the regions (*oblasti*), which allows a very good coverage of the country; second, the local establishment of these units has allowed for a very close link with the populations willing to get involved; and third, the absence of a stock of weapons and dedicated equipment has greatly reduced the combat effectiveness of these units.

The third option would be to have a military reserve that covers the whole territory for a deep defence of the national territory. This model must allow for building a reserve based on the lowest local levels of organization of the State, building a “proximity reserve” allowing citizens to associate their professional and personal lives with their commitment to the reserve – this approach increases the involvement of families and local “communities” – and training, equipping, and reflecting on a reserve used primarily in its area of establishment.

Reserve units at the company or at battalion level would be organized locally. Their command structure would be established as a mirror of the administrative and geographic organization of the country. To take the case of the French army, the basic reserve unit (company or battalion) would be based on the departmental level. In each department the local representative of the armed forces would be responsible, in coordination with the civilian authorities, for recruiting, training, and employing the reserve units in their geographic area. The challenge would be to clearly define the responsibilities and the chain of command. The Armed Forces would retain Full Command over these units. Nevertheless, this command would be exercised at the local level in the geographical area considered and in coordination with the civil authorities. The training and equipment of these units should be controlled at national level. The heart of the chain of command would be the active-duty officer representing the armed forces at the local level. To help in his command task, this officer should have a tactical staff composed of reservists from his geographical area of competence. Great care must be taken to ensure that these units remain under the operational command of the military authority and are not used as a mobile force in the service of the civilian authority.

64. French military sources.

The infrastructure footprint could be low. At the very least these units need a modest sized barracks to house the local unit's command post and to ensure its autonomy from the civil authority. All equipment and weapons must be held at the local level. Coordination with the internal security forces should be considered. The support of these units would be ensured at the local level with the support of the civil services.

In this case, reservists are recruited at the local level for employment as close as possible to their "catchment area". They are assigned to the tactical staff or to the elementary unit of the zone. Reservists are therefore recruited locally to be employed locally. The challenge relies on the active officer of the zone establishing privileged links with the civil and economic authorities of the zone in order to communicate with employers and the environment of reservists.

These reserve units are tasked mainly with territorial defence missions of their zone. They must be able to carry out the simple missions of light infantry. The issues are twofold: giving a real operational capability to the local tactical staff, and training subordinate units to enjoy a real benefit compared to the interior security forces. Training standards can be coordinated at the national level, but the use of these units must be adapted to the local context (rural, urban, mountainous, coastal, and so on).

CONCLUSION

Mass or technology? The Ukrainian example shows that there is no clear answer and that both parameters must be taken into account simultaneously; the abandonment of either could be fatal. It is a cornelian dilemma for Western countries whose financial resources are limited, whose military equipment is increasingly expensive, and whose societies seem to be more and more closed to the fact of war.

Perhaps the solution lies in the choice of the cursor that moves between the two elements, in making courageous and balanced decisions. In other words, in choosing one model while keeping the ability to reverse a decision in the medium term. The choices that have to be made, not only regarding the reserves, but more broadly for the Western armed forces, will prove crucial for the future of our nations. It is clear that these strategic decisions cannot be the result of tight budgets alone.

In any case, it appears certain that while high technology is necessary, it is not sufficient on its own and can never replace mass. First for tactical reasons, but also and perhaps especially, because mass requires a commitment of the whole Nation. However, as the Russian-Ukrainian example shows, there is no possible victory in a high-intensity conflict without the commitment of the whole country.

The main issue is to make choices and to build a model, to prepare a defence tool that responds to a threat assessment. If courageous choices have to be made, it is first a question of honestly analysing the security challenges that our countries will have to face. Then and

only then will the choices of structures be necessary. Any other approach could be fatal in a turbulent geostrategic context for Western nations which increasingly question their future.

Finally, it appears that focusing on the Ukrainian conflict inevitably places an emphasis on mass. If the purpose of this paper was to propose options for reserve models, these do not exclude the fundamental role of specialist reservists. The fact that reserves also offer the opportunity for specialist skills is essential and this would require a dedicated study as the stakes are so high.

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