

# Why Have So Many Russian Generals Been Killed?

*Top Russian officers are dying at rates not seen since World War II. Cellphones and command structures may be the reasons why.*



It is happening at a shocking rate. More than once a week, a Russian general is killed in Ukraine. When Lt. Gen. Yakov Rezantsev was killed in a Ukrainian strike on the Chornobaivka air base near Kherson — a city the Russians had captured and held in the early days of the war — it brought the total to seven, according to Western and Ukrainian officials. Rezantsev had reportedly told his troops on Feb. 28 — four days after the Russian invasion began — that the war was nearly over.

*Lt. Gen. Yakov Rezantsev*

In two decades in Vietnam, the U.S. lost nine generals, most of whom were killed when their helicopters were shot down. During the long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, one American general died; he was shot by an Afghan soldier. World War II might offer the closest comparison to what is happening to the Russians in Ukraine. According to Aleksander Maslov's book, "Fallen Soviet Generals," roughly six or seven generals died each month during that war. That's about where Russia is now.

Overall Russian casualty figures are high as well; two weeks ago, NATO officials estimated that between 7,000 and 15,000 Russian troops had been killed in Ukraine. But generals don't usually operate near the front lines. As commanders, they direct their juniors from a distance. And they are more closely guarded and protected than their soldiers. In short, they shouldn't be in the line of fire.



**"Inconceivable,"** David Petraeus, a four-star general and former CIA director, told Grid. **How is it, then, that so many top Russian commanders have died in Ukraine?** Military and intelligence experts say the *answers involve technology, communication, the command structure of the Russian military and its overall performance.* And as with much else in this war, the Ukrainian resistance has something to do with it as well.

## Tracking "anyone with gray hair"

Petraeus and other former military leaders say that one key factor in the generals' deaths involves a fundamental problem in the Russian campaign: As one put it colorfully, *"their comms suck."* Multiple reports suggest the Ukrainians **have successfully intercepted Russian communications** — a result of poorly encrypted devices and other security failings on the part of the Russians and clever use of technology by the Ukrainians. There have been reports of Russian soldiers **using mobile phones and analogue radios — both easy to intercept and more likely to betray a unit's location.** That might mean two things — neither good for the Russian forces: They cannot communicate efficiently with their own troops, and/or **their communications have been open to easy interception and geolocation.**

*"[The Russians] are talking on cellphones, on Ukrainian cell service," Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges, the former commander of U.S. forces in Europe, told Grid. "I remember when I saw [Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy] on day four of the war, walking around with a cellphone, and I thought, 'How is he able to talk on a cellphone? How was the cell service still up?'"*

Hodges believes the Russians **could easily have disabled cell service in Ukraine and chose not to because they determined they needed to use it themselves.**

*"They didn't have confidence or didn't have their own tactical network like we do, where you bring your network with you," he said. "And either out of arrogance or failure to appreciate how easily Ukrainians would be able to intercept and geolocate where they were on the phone and then put a bomb*



on it. That's why so many of these guys are getting killed. It's because of arrogance or lack of operational experience and understanding the danger of talking on the cellphone."

The Ukrainians appear to have taken great advantage of these Russian failings, **and Western intelligence agencies may be helping them.**

A person inside Zelenskyy's inner circle told the Wall Street Journal that Ukraine had an intelligence team dedicated to targeting Russia's officer class. And Ukrainian officials, for their part, say **their forces have concentrated fire on Russian command-and-control units near the front lines.**

Jeffrey Edmonds, a senior analyst at the Center for a New American Security, told The Washington Post that Ukrainian forces appear to be **targeting "anyone with gray hair standing near a bunch of antennas."**  
Command and control

Others point to an issue that has nothing to do with technology and **everything to do with the way the Russian military is run.** Several experts — including two high-ranking American generals — told Grid that the deaths of so many senior officers are **a result of Russia's command structure.** Lower-ranking officers in other militaries typically have far greater agency — the latitude to make decisions in the heat of the moment. **The Russian military construct leaves almost all decision-making power at the higher level.**

*"I think I know why it's happening,"* said John McLaughlin, former acting director of the CIA and a Grid special contributor. *"This is a flaw in the way the Russians organize their armies. In the American army, in many ways the key figures are junior officers and noncommissioned officers — sergeants, lieutenants, captains — and in the American army, even though there is a chain of command, the rules of engagement are such that people at lower levels are given a great deal of freedom and encouragement to make decisions on the spot, to make a call and do something and respond to emergencies and basically roll with the punches or the bullets, whatever it is. In the Russian army, that kind of structure does not exist. And so generals go forward in a situation like this."*

Hodges agreed. "The Russian methodology for command and control is very **tightly centralized**, so decisions are made at the top. They do not want to encourage junior leaders to use initiative or make decisions down at the tactical level." Throw in the failings and setbacks on the battlefield, Hodges said, and the Russian senior officers have had more reasons to "go forward."

*"When your planning begins to fall apart because of the nature of war, fog and friction and uncertainty, and because of stronger than anticipated resistance, then you have to have a very senior person who comes forward,"* he said. *"And so you've got a lot of senior officers out there, exposed or having to move up close to what's going on to try and unravel the various problems that normally should have been sorted out by a much more junior, lower level commander."*

Meanwhile, the Pentagon, NATO and Ukrainian officials have all said the Russian army in Ukraine **is struggling with poor morale.** And that in turn has moved some troops to desert or even push back against their commanders. The most vivid and extreme example of this involved the 37th Motor Rifle Brigade, which was fighting outside Kyiv in mid-March. **Troops attacked and injured their commanding officer** after the brigade suffered heavy losses, according to a Western official and a Ukrainian journalist. The troops ran a tank into Col. Yuri Medvedev, injuring both his legs, according to Ukrainian journalist Roman Tsymbaliuk. Tsymbaliuk reported that the colonel had been hospitalized; a senior Western official said later that Medvedev had died of his wounds. **The attack by his own forces were, the official said, "a consequence of the scale of the losses taken by his own brigade."**

## The impact

It doesn't take a military expert to understand that killing an army's generals will slow momentum and hurt a unit's morale. No doubt it also serves to boost the morale and resolve of the Ukrainian resistance. And unlike the killings of ordinary soldiers, it is difficult to hide the news of a commander's death.

*"It is inconceivable to lose so many general officers,"* Petraeus told Grid. Beyond the generals, *"the Russians have reportedly lost considerably more battalion and regimental commanders — lieutenant colonels and colonels. So the loss in experience and expertise are enormous, and the disruption has to be equally so."*

*“The best face you could put on it would be ‘leading from the front,’”* McLaughlin said, *“but if too many generals go down ... then the command structure collapses. And I suspect that’s a little bit of what’s happened here.”*

News of the deaths of senior Russian officers is celebrated on Ukrainian social media as more evidence of the power of the resistance. Ukrainian and Western officials have named the generals killed in action, and in each case they have provided detail about the circumstances of their deaths.

Not surprisingly, given the blackout of any negative characterizations of the war — or even use of the word “war” — there is no news coverage about these losses. Thus far, Russian President Vladimir Putin has referred only to the death of one general, Maj. Gen. Andrey Sukhovetsky, in a speech soon after the start of the war. At Sukhovetsky’s burial in Novorossiysk, a port city on the Black Sea, a deputy mayor said the general “died heroically during a combat mission during a special operation in Ukraine.”

There may well be a tension at play in Russia, between the **desire to hide bad news from the public and a historic tendency to celebrate publicly the heroism of military figures**. How these deaths alter thinking and strategy is difficult to gauge. Col. John Barranco, senior Marine Corps fellow at the Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security at the Atlantic Council, cautioned that we shouldn’t think of these Russians who’ve been killed as holding the stature of three- or four-star generals in the U.S. The closer analogy would be brigade-level or deputy-division level commanders. **“These are not the people advising Putin or the ministry of defense,”** Barranco told Grid. But experts said this much was clear: The deaths of senior officers have further slowed Russian advances, in each case requiring new command structures to be put in place, and they have punished already low levels of morale.

The killings have also raised questions about overall command and control of the Russian “special military operation.” As the New York Times reported, **it’s not clear who is in charge of the war, in the role of field commander. Absent such a figure** — think Gen. Tommy Franks or Petraeus himself — who will see and hear from junior officers about problems and move quickly to address them? Western officials are left to assume that **the men making decisions are back in Moscow, far from the fight:** Defense Minister Sergei K. Shoigu; Gen. Valery Gerasimov, chief of the general staff of the Russian military; and Putin himself.

No experts Grid spoke with said that was a recipe for effective conduct of a war.

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## **Why Have So Many Russian Generals Been Killed?**

Yet **another Russian general, Lieutenant-General Andrei Mordvichev, is reported to have been killed** by Ukrainian forces in a conflict that is less than a month old. Mordvichev’s death was announced on Ukraine social media on March 20 2022, but has yet to be confirmed by the Kremlin. His death, if confirmed, will bring the number of Russian generals killed by the Ukrainian armed forces since the war began to five.

**The role of an army general is to command and supervise strategy rather than conduct tactical actions** on the ground. As a result, casualties at this rank have tended to be low. Comparing this figure of five reported dead in less than a month with the total number of US generals killed between 1965 and 1975 in Vietnam — **just 12** — you have to ask why so many Russian generals are dying.



Sergei Shoigu Russian defence minister

It is very likely that the **targeting of Russian senior ground commanders forms part of a wider Ukrainian strategy to disrupt their enemies' command-and-control network**. The Ukrainian forces are aware of the leadership approach that has been adopted by the Russian armed forces since 2001, much of which is based on international analysis conducted by the US and Nato agencies. **Its rigid hierarchical system**, overseen by an autocratic leader in Vladimir Putin, condemns junior ranks to **a chain of perpetual fear, with little allocated for independent thinking or decision-making**. Putin manages the military in much the same way as

he does the wider Russian state, **choosing loyalty to him above professional competence**. This is no more clearly illustrated than the choice of **Sergei Shoigu as Russian defence minister in 2012**. Lacking any military experience or understanding, Shoigu was chosen as he posed little political threat to Putin or established military tradition. He has been criticised by many for failing to introduce major reforms after the Georgian campaign in 2008, which highlighted key failings in the Russian military in carrying out combat operations.

### Do experts have something to add to public debate?

We think so: **Corruption in the Russian military**

Corruption is **endemic within all aspects of Russian life** – and this includes the military. A recent report, published as part of the London-based International Government Defence Integrity Index, identified that the Russian military had a corruption risk of high “owing to extremely limited external oversight of the policies, budgets, activities and acquisitions of defence institutions”. The report also highlighted a lack of transparency on procurement and the issuing of defence contracts, with a rating of only 36 out of 100 in this category. Loyalty to Putin may have landed senior leaders a place in the inner circle, but this has been at the expense of the personnel they serve.

The public procurement sector often carries with it opportunities for corrupt practices, and this is no different in the Russian state. A report issued by the Risk and Compliance Portal (2021), which examines corrupt practices within states, claims that: “*Bribes, kickbacks and other irregular payments are often exchanged to obtain public contracts. Companies report favouritism in decisions of government officials, and public funds are frequently diverted due to corruption.*” The report also states that military contracts were more likely to receive approval based not on the quality or standard of the bid, but rather on the company’s personal relationships with state officials and loyalty to the Kremlin.



**Corruption in Russia’s armed forces may have damaged its effectiveness as a fighting unit.** EPA/Yuri Kochetov

Military reforms over the past decade have failed to enforce a clear agenda of development and instead **have allowed many of their military units to become low grade and poorly trained**. A recent US Defence intelligence assessment suggested that Russian forces had **sold much of the best equipment during the early months of their deployment to the Ukraine border in 2021, due to poor pay and conditions.**

On average, Russian professional soldiers of junior ranks earn US\$480 (£360) a month, whereas their equivalents in the Ukrainian army are receiving three times that figure. The division between pay, working conditions and morale could play a big role in determining the outcome of this conflict.

### Sitting targets

It is true that senior commanders have always been exposed to becoming targets on the battlefield, with the Red Army using this to devastating effect in the ruins of Stalingrad in 1942, in which Soviet snipers targeted

both junior and senior ranks. However, what differs between this conflict and those fought in the past is the proximity to the front line in which Russian generals appear to be operating.

The lack of confidence that they have in their lines of communication and the standards of ground commanders – the result of chronic levels of corruption – is providing clear opportunities for the Ukrainian military to strike at the few competent military leaders. At Stalingrad, the Wehrmacht officer commanding, General Friedrich Paulus, **was at least 15 miles away from the city during the battle**. This ensured that he and his staff maintained a wider strategic view, placing confidence in his junior ranks rather than exposing himself or his command team to tactical-level decision-making.

Ukraine has several well-equipped combat units who would be capable of carrying out specialist missions, so it would seem that any opportunity might be taken to **target the leadership through assassination, designed to disrupt the lines of communication, cause confusion, and slow the Russian advance further**. It is also hugely symbolic and provides a clear example to the Russian rank and file that their enemies can target senior leadership with ease, demonstrating a failure of the system to protect their senior staff. It is a clear symbol of a weak and incompetent communication system that is forcing generals to move from strategic to tactical decision making. **This causes mistrust in the effectiveness of chains of command**, with doubt spreading much faster than conviction. Meanwhile, the slower the advance becomes, the more time the Ukrainian command has to prepare their centres of population for the advancing enemy forces.