



Inequality kills: on Russian combat ineffectiveness in Ukraine and beyond

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Pundits, politicians and generals are debating how long it would take for Russia, once the war in Ukraine is over, to re-constitute its forces with a view to attacking NATO. While a much-discussed study in late 2023 by the German Council on Foreign Relations projected six to ten years, European officials fear the number to be as little as three years. Supreme Allied Commander Europe, General Christopher Cavoli, has warned of a Russian force re-constituting “far faster”

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Summary

What would Russia's military strategy be in a war with NATO? Before 2022, many analysts worried about the scenario in which Russia, leveraging a tactically proficient and well-coordinated combined arms force, could swiftly overrun the Baltics in a matter of days. Drawing on a statistical analysis of historical battles and an examination of Russian force structure and equipment losses in Ukraine, we challenge this view.

Endemic inequality within the Russian Armed Forces will continue to impede their adoption of the sophisticated tactics necessary for manoeuvre warfare. Therefore, we anticipate that a future potential Russian attack would resemble a war of attrition. Unable to quickly out-maneuvre NATO forces, Moscow would aim to deploy overwhelming firepower and manpower against Allied troops and civilian populations, with an aim to inflict widespread and sustained destruction.

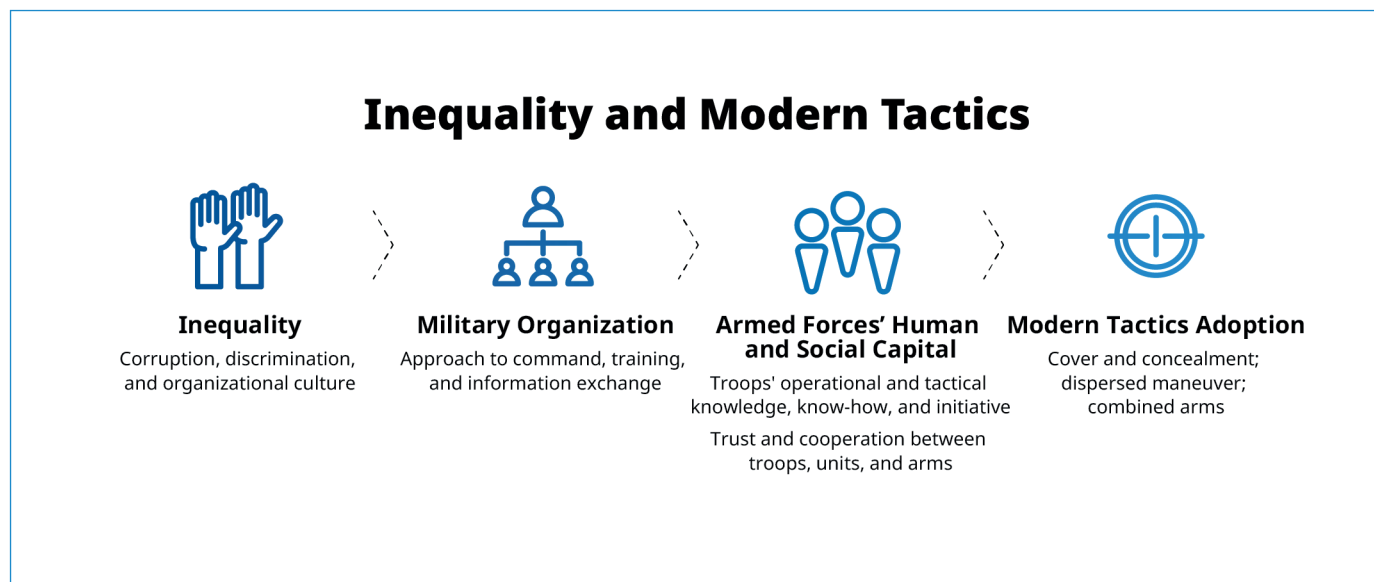


Figure 1. Source: constructed by the authors.

than initially assumed.¹ In light of Russia's mobilization of manpower and stepped-up defence production, politicians and planners must anticipate contingencies sooner rather than later.

How would Russia fight against NATO? Before 2022, much attention was paid to the possibility of a Russian “*coup de main*” in North-Eastern Europe: a tactically proficient, combined arms offensive that would see Russia win within days. A widely-discussed 2015 RAND war game projected Russian forces to reach Tallinn and Riga in about 60 hours;² a 2020 scenario study predicted Russia could take all Baltic capitals and link up with Kaliningrad in a week;³ and a 2021 war game by the Swedish Defence Research Agency saw Russian forces establish a corridor across the Suwalki gap after 48 hours, reaching the Lithuanian coast within 96 hours.⁴ In all those scenarios, NATO Allies would then face a hard choice. Unable to accept a Russian *fait accompli*, they would either need to mount a likely bloody counter-offensive to re-conquer lost territory; or threaten nuclear escalation to coerce Russia into handing back occupied land.

In light of recent experiences in Ukraine, we seek to re-evaluate how Russia would fight NATO and specific constraints the country would face. We argue that inequality – a factor that thoroughly divides the Russian Armed Forces due to corruption, discrimination and culture – makes it difficult to adopt modern tactics. This is because inequality causes organizational pathologies that undermine an armed forces' human and social capital and morale. Leveraging data from historical battles since 1917,

as well as from the Russian war against Ukraine since 2022, we find that data are consistent with our hypothesis. In the hypothetical case of a future war with NATO, Russian commanders would, due to the organizational pathologies that stem from inequality, favour an attritional approach drawing upon vast fire- and manpower, rather than a lightning run enabled by manoeuvre warfare.

Modern tactics and their preconditions

Modern tactics were forged on the battlegrounds of World War I. The war's first weeks saw bloodshed on an unprecedented scale, due to an exponential increase in the range and rate of fires.⁵ The “kill zone” that an army had to cross to close in with the enemy had become almost insurmountable. Or, as German novelist Ernst Jünger described in his “Storms of Steel,” a soldier could take “part in a great military operation without coming within sight of the enemy.”⁶

In response, Europe's military class developed a set of “modern tactics” to move, kill enemy forces, and take or hold ground in the face of overwhelming firepower. What became crucial was to exploit terrain features for cover and concealment, so as to deny the enemy a visible target or, at least, an unblocked line of fire. To achieve this, modern

¹ Christian Mölling and Torben Schütz, “Preventing the Next War (#EDINA III),” German Council on Foreign Relations, 2023, <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/preventing-next-war-edina-iii>; United States Senate- Armed Services Committee, Statement of General Christopher G. Cavoli, 11 April 2024, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/cavoli_statement.pdf.

² David A. Shlapak and Michael Johnson, “Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank: Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics,” RAND Corporation, 2016, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1200/RR1253/RAND_RR1253.pdf?zoom=80%25.

³ Richard Hooker Jr, “Major Theatre War: Russia Attacks the Baltic States,” *The RUSI Journal*, 165, no. 7 (November 2020): 85-94.

⁴ Robert Dalsjö, Johan Engvall and Krister Pallin, “Fighting for a Draw in the Baltic,” in Krister Pallin and Eva Hagström Frisell, eds., *Western Military Capability in Northern Europe 2020: Collective Defence* (Swedish Defence Research Agency, 2021), 101- 121.

⁵ Michael Howard, *War in European History* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 97-104.

⁶ Ernst Jünger, *Storm of Steel* (Penguin Classics, 2004).

tactics broke up Napoleonic style frontal assaults of large units marching in unison into dispersed units manoeuvring in a coordinated, but independent manner. Arms were combined to maximize effectiveness: the suppressive fire of artillery would keep a defender hunkered down, while infantry and sappers would leave their cover to cross open ground and attack enemy positions. Tanks, in turn, made their appearance during the later years of the Great War, primarily supporting infantry through their firepower and protection, but with initial considerations given to exploiting their higher mobility.⁷ Those tenets of modern tactics therefore date back to World War I, but they have remained valid ever since. New weapons technologies, such as helicopters or electronic warfare, only reinforced the problem that those tactics are trying to solve: how to operate in an ever more lethal battlefield.⁸

Not all armies, though, are able to implement modern tactics – it does take significant human and social capital. As for human capital, modern tactics require knowledge, know-how and initiative. Dispersed manoeuvre, for example, requires small-unit leaders to tailor movements to the peculiarities of local terrain and the vagaries of the enemy's manoeuvres. Combined arms warfare presupposes that tactical commanders understand infantry, artillery, armour and other arms and manage weapons systems with diverse needs in fuel, ammunition, and spare parts.⁹

As regards social capital, this takes the form of trust and cooperation, be it between commanders and subordinates, or between different units and arms. Just like any other complex human endeavour, interdependencies also abound in war and can only be solved through collaboration – here in the form of combined arms warfare. For example, tanks unaccompanied by dismounted infantry are vulnerable to anti-tank guided missiles fired by enemy infantry, while infantry without armour has a hard time dealing with dug-in positions. Fire and manoeuvre are equally interdependent: suppressive fire aimed too long leaves manoeuvring units dangerously exposed; suppressive fire aimed too short results in fratricide. For logistics, if frontline combat troops fail to protect the usually thinly protected logistical convoys, the latter get killed and the former run out of supplies.¹⁰

Military inequality loses battles

An army's human and social capital is determined by its organizational set-up: its approach to human resources, command, and information management. To enable the adoption of modern tactics, training, education, and promotions should build an officer and non-commissioned officer corps capable of leading, acting and adapting. A culture of "mission command," should delegate decision-making power so that capable junior leaders can display initiative and adjust to local conditions.¹¹ To allow for trust and cooperation, institutionalized information sharing should spread timely and accurate information across the force as concerns terrain, enemy and their own disposition.¹² Inequality, in turn, can distort this organizational set-up in a way that undermines human and social capital and ultimately hinders the adoption of modern tactics.

But why? Inequality in a military organization means that resources, opportunities, and treatment systematically differ among soldiers. The underlying causes can be simple corruption; systematic discrimination based on social or ethnic identity; or a military culture steeped in hierarchy and status orientation. The consequence is pervasive mistrust that permeates unequal militaries and overrides military effectiveness in determining organizational practices. In human resource management, promotions favour those soldiers who are perceived as loyal or can leverage clientelist networks. In training and education, the focus is on instilling blind obedience and impressing superiors, rather than conveying combat knowledge, know-how or initiative. Information management becomes about hoarding, stove piping and scapegoating, rather than sharing information within the hierarchy. The exercise of command may degenerate into officers exercising constant control or, conversely, simply abandoning subordinates whom they do not trust.¹³ Inequality, therefore, makes it difficult to adopt modern tactics.

⁷ See Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton University Press, 2004), 35-39 and 44-46. Anthony King, *Command: The Twenty-First-Century General* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 42-50 and 105-106. See also Brett Friedman, *On Tactics: A Theory of Victory in Battle* (Naval Institute Press, 2017).

⁸ Ryan Grauer, Michael C. Horowitz, "What Determines Military Victory? Testing the Modern System," *Security Studies* 21, no. 1, (January 2012): 83-112.

⁹ Stephen Biddle, *Nonstate Warfare: The Military Methods of Guerillas, Warlords, and Militias* (Princeton University Press, 2021), 75-83.

¹⁰ Biddle (2021), 83-89.

¹¹ *Ibid* (2004), 48-51.

¹² Brett Friedman, *On operations: Operational Art and Military Disciplines* (Naval Institute Press, 2021), 69.

¹³ On inequality and modern tactics, see Jason Lyall, *Divided Armies: Inequality and Battlefield Performance in Modern War* (Princeton University Press, 2020). On military organizational practices and pathologies, see Caitlin Talmadge, *The Dictator's Army: Battlefield Effectiveness in Authoritarian Regimes* (Cornell University Press, 2015), 13-18. On social structure and battlefield effectiveness, see Stephen Peter Rosen, "Military Effectiveness: Why Society Matters," *International Security* 19, no. 4 (Spring 1995): 5-31.

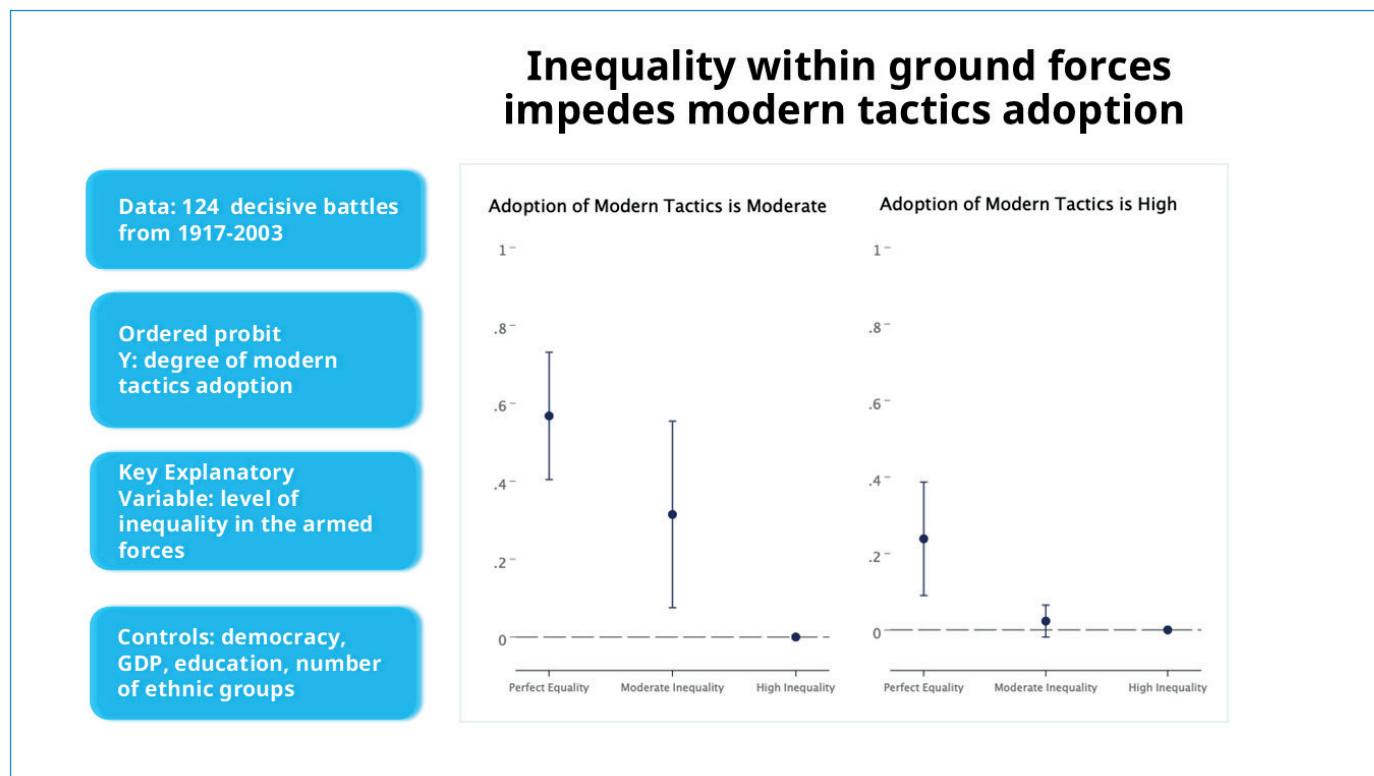


Figure 2. Source: constructed from table 1. The 95 percent confidence intervals capture the range of values for the predicted level of modernization at a specific level of equality.

Evidence: inequality and modern tactics

To test our argument, we first conduct a statistical analysis of battlefield performance since World War I. In addition, we also derive two observable implications for Russian combat effectiveness in Ukraine. As a highly unequal organization, we expect the Russian armed forces to struggle with a force structure centred on modern tactics and to suffer equipment losses, which reflect this struggle.

A statistical analysis of battles from 1917 to 2003

Our quantitative analysis is based on a data-set of 124 decisive battles fought during inter-state wars between 1917 and 2003 that was created by merging data on modern tactics adoption from Grauer and Horowitz (2012) with data on inequality within military organizations from Lyall

(2020).¹⁴ The unit of analysis is the armed forces participating in a decisive operation or battle. The Falklands War (April 2-June 14, 1982), for instance, results in two data points: For both the UK and Argentina, there is one observation for each “decisive operation” between 11 and 14 June 1982, when British forces assaulted the Argentinian defences at Stanley. Our dependent variable classifies an army’s use of modern tactics in those battles as minimal, medium or high. The index reflects the use of cover and concealment, dispersion, small unit manoeuvre, and combined arms.¹⁵ To capture inequality within a military, we use a measure reflecting the share of personnel from marginalized or repressed ethnic groups to distinguish between low, medium, and high degrees of “military inequality.”¹⁶

The results are clear-cut. Inequality has a statistically significant, negative effect on modern tactics adoption through various model specifications.¹⁷ And as shown in Figure 2, this impact is substantial: for militaries with perfect equality, there is a 56-percent chance of partially adopting and a 24-percent chance of fully adopting modern tactics. These probabilities decline, respectively, to 31 and 2.3 percent for moderate levels of inequality and become 0 for high level of inequality.¹⁸

¹⁴ Ryan Grauer and Michael C. Horowitz, “What Determines Military Victory? Testing the Modern System,” *Security Studies* 21, no. 1 (February 2012): 83-112, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2012.650594> and Lyall (2020), *Divided Armies*.

¹⁵ Grauer and Horowitz, “What Determines Military Victory? Testing the Modern System.”

¹⁶ Lyall (2020): 153. Identity-based discrimination is obviously only one dimension of military inequality as described above, but correlates with corruption and military culture.

¹⁷ Two specifications can be found in the Annex.

¹⁸ Results are based on an ordered probit regression that also controlled for the number of ethnic groups; polity score; GDP per capita; and education level. Predicted probabilities were computed holding all other covariates at the mean values. Confidence intervals are based on delta-method standard errors. The corresponding regression coefficients are in table 1 Annex, model 2.

Russia in Ukraine since 2022: endemic inequality

Inequality based on discrimination, corruption and organizational culture has deep historical and institutional roots in the Russian military. Ethnic identity traditionally divides. Russians and other Slavs dominated the officer corps already during Soviet times, while ethno-religious minorities from the country's periphery were and are over-represented in the rank and file.¹⁹ Corruption has also been a long-standing issue. Russia's economic collapse of the 1990s led to industrial-scale thievery within the military. Individual commanders were exploiting their authority over conscripts to run de facto fiefdoms and enterprises for private gain.²⁰ As became evident during the invasion of 2022, despite almost two decades of military reform, corruption has continued to affect Russian manpower and supplies. Unmet but unreported recruiting quotas meant that units were understaffed; theft of supplies led to the situation in which even basic staples like food, clothing or spare parts were missing. Attempted remedies were themselves inherently corrupt and unequal, ranging from foraging and the use of personal networks to secure supplies, to forced mobilization in Donetsk and Luhansk to plug gaps in manpower.²¹ In addition, Russian military culture is strongly hierarchical. The officer corps, and particularly general staff officers, consider themselves a unique caste that has internalized the "correct" principles of military science. Their elite status contrasts markedly with the rank and file, who are regarded as incapable of anything but obedience based on detailed orders and rigorous discipline.²²

This inequality has, and continues to reverberate in Russian military command; information management; and approach to human resources. Even if local circumstances indicate differently, lower echelons are expected to strictly execute orders until they are formally counter-manded by higher headquarters. The flipside of this rigid and centralized approach to command and control are mistrust, secrecy, and dishonest reporting. To avoid being seen as responsible for potential failure to implement a plan, Russian officers tend to embellish the facts or transfer blame to others. Training and education, in turn, seem focused on acquiring narrow technical qualifications in one's own branch and impressing superiors through the rigorous conduct of scripted drills and exercises, rather than prac-

ticing initiative or combined arms warfare under realistic conditions. Disregarding the welfare of soldiers tends to be built into the Russian system. In peacetime, conscripts have traditionally been subject to hazing and ill treatment. In wartime, Russia's military has displayed a staggering indifference towards losses amongst ordinary troops.²³ The consequences of all this on human and social capital are clear-cut, or as one observer put it: "Russia's military has questionable competence and lacks mutual trust."²⁴

Battalion Tactical Groups failed

Turning to the battlefields of Ukraine, a first observable consequence of Russian military inequality was the failure of the Battalion Tactical Group (BTG) concept. Russia had introduced this force structure as part of its military modernization reforms after the 2008 Georgia war. The goal was clear: adopt modern tactics through independent manoeuvre and combined arms warfare at a small-unit level. BTGs were to be task-organized, but essentially comprised tank and motorized or mechanized infantry companies at their core, reinforced by combat support in the form of artillery, air-defence, combat engineers or other units.

Human capital requirements were much higher than in previous Russian force structures. Battalion commanders were already supposed to coordinate different arms and the associated complex logistics, rather than the divisional or regimental level for which had been responsible in the past. BTGs were therefore intended to be staffed entirely by officers and contractors rather than conscripts.²⁵

While impressive on paper and supposedly successful in the Donbas in 2014, BTGs proved woefully inadequate on the Ukrainian battlefields in 2022. Corruption, dishonest reporting and its impact on force generation were part of this story. Russian military statistics displayed a paradox during the 2010s: the reported number of combat-ready BTGs had steadily increased, in line with political intent. But the number of contracted servicemen plateaued. Many BTGs were thus under-manned, with infantry particularly scarce.

On the Ukrainian battlefield, this resulted in various pathologies detrimental to the implementation of modern

¹⁹ Michael Gjerstad and Niels Bo Poulsen, "Russian Military Culture – The Achilles Heel of the Reform Process?" in Niels Bo Poulsen and Jørgen Staun eds., *Russia's Military Might—A Portrait of its Armed Forces* (Djof Publishing, 2021), 109-144.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 121.

²¹ See Dara Massicot, "What Russia Got Wrong: Can Moscow Learn from Its Failures in Ukraine?", *Foreign Affairs* 102 no. 2, (March/April 2023), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/what-russia-got-wrong-moscow-failures-in-ukraine-dara-massicot>; Pavel Baev, "Russia's War in Ukraine: Misleading Doctrine and Misguided Strategy," *French Institute of International Relations (IFRI)*, 2022.

²² Gjerstad and Poulsen (2021), 120-129.

²³ See Mykhaylo Zabrotskyi, Jack Watling, Oleksandr V Danylyuk and Nick Reynolds, "Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," *RUSI*, 30 November 2022: 44-52, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/special-resources/preliminary-lessons-conventional-warfighting-russias-invasion-ukraine-february-july-2022>.

²⁴ Jamon K. Junius, "Mission Command in the Ukraine War," *US Army War College*, 2023.

²⁵ Aleksey Gayday, "Reform of the Russian Army," in Mikhail Barabanov, ed., *Russia's New Army*, (Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, 2011), 9-33; Lester W. Grau and Charles K. Bartles, "Getting to Know the Russian Battalion Tactical Group," *RUSI*, 14 April 2022, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/getting-know-russian-battalion-tactical-group>; Markus Reisner, and Christian Hahn, "Russlands Bataillonstaktische Gruppen in der Operativen Planung und im Taktischen Einsatz im Krieg um die Ukraine 2014 bis 2023," *Sirius-Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen* 7 no. 1: 11-24.

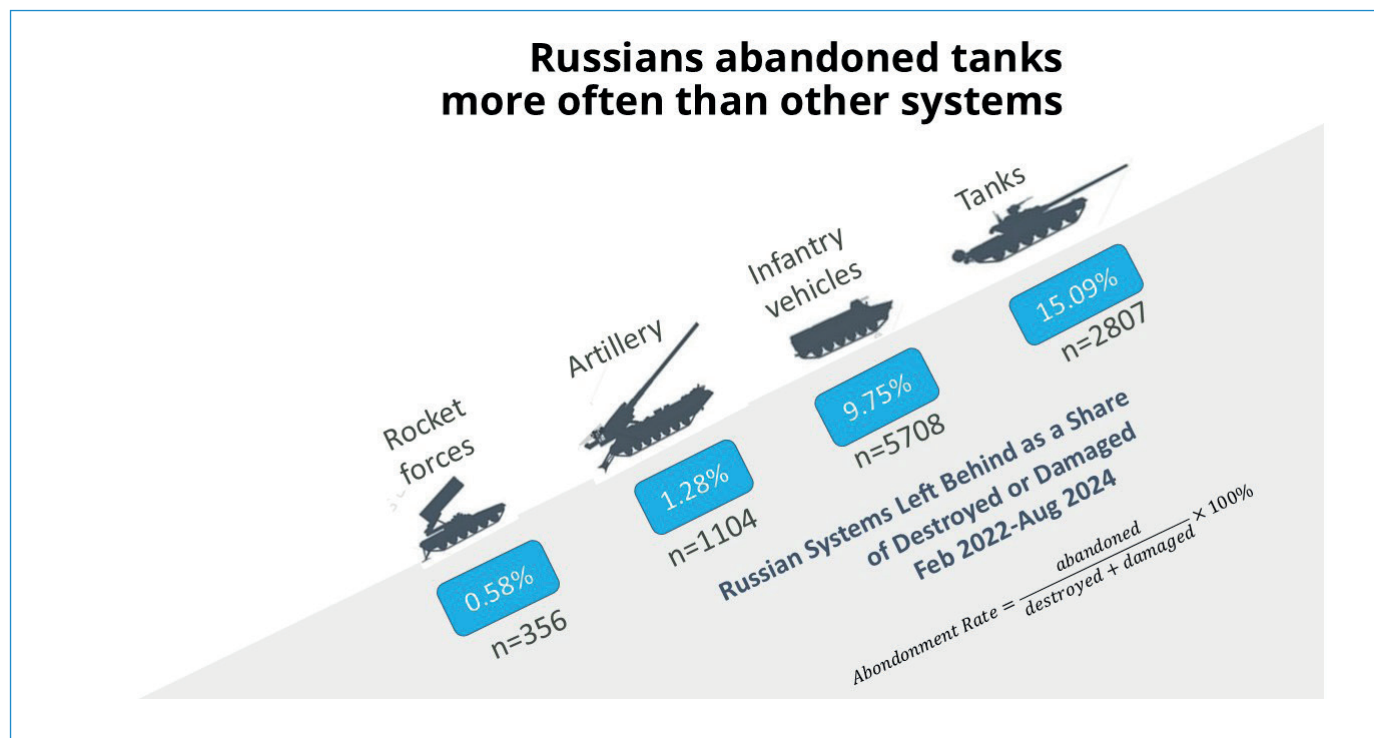


Figure 3. Source: Constructed by the authors using Oryx' dataset available at <https://www.kaggle.com/datasets/piterfm/2022-ukraine-russia-war-equipment-losses-oryx>

tactics. On the one hand, some BTGs moved into battle with all their tanks and armoured vehicles, but lacking the required number in infantry to dismount and counter Ukrainian anti-tank weapons. Other BTGs, in turn, relied on infantry that had been scrambled from different Russian military and National Guard units, or from the mobilized population of Donetsk and Luhansk or private military companies.²⁶ BTG commanders were in an untenable position: most of them lacked the necessary training to understand branches other than their own, nor could they exert initiative on a fluid battlefield. They were also supposed to implement complex tactics in cooperation with personnel with whom they had never trained and were not familiar.²⁷

Given their poor performance, eight months after the invasion in November 2022, Minister of Defence Shoigu announced that BTGs would be discontinued.²⁸

And tanks were left behind

Russia's inability to implement modern tactics has also manifested itself in patterns of equipment losses in Ukraine, a second observable implication of inequality.

Russian equipment losses in Ukraine are substantial. Tanks were especially affected, with Russia losing at least half of its tank force during the first year. Images and reports of destroyed Russian tanks became so ubiquitous that some observers questioned the continued relevance of armour on the modern battlefield.²⁹ For our purposes, we focus on an oft over-looked statistic: the share of equipment that was abandoned as compared to destroyed. We expect this statistic to be higher for Russian armour than for other equipment.

But why focus on tanks; why on abandonment; and why on comparing? First, tanks are more dependent on coordination and cooperation than other arms. On the one hand, they need dismounted infantry to protect them against enemy infantry: modern anti-tank missiles usually have a larger range than the ammunitions on most tanks. On the other hand, tanks top other arms in terms of logistical needs, particularly ammunition and fuel. Armour is thus particularly affected by faulty force

²⁶ See Massicot 2023; Michael Kofman and Rob Lee, "Not Built for Purpose: The Russian Military's Ill-Fated Force Design," *War on the Rocks*, 2 June 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/06/not-built-for-purpose-the-russian-militarys-ill-fated-force-design/>.

²⁷ Zabrodskyi et al. (2022): 45-46; Baev (2022): 16 ff.

²⁸ "Russia to Make 'Major Changes' to Armed Forces from 2023 to 2026," *Reuters*, 17 January 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-make-major-changes-armed-forces-2023-2026-2023-01-17/>; Anna Maria Dynier, "Russia's Armed Forces Two Years After the Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine," PISM, 28 February 2024, <https://pism.pl/publications/russias-armed-forces-two-years-after-the-full-scale-invasion-of-ukraine/>.

²⁹ See Phillips Payson O'Brien, "War Will Never Be this Bulky Again," *The Atlantic*, 26 May 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/05/ukrainerrussia-putin-war/638423/>.

employment that ignores the tenets of modern tactics.³⁰ Second, abandonment reflects faulty tactics. If we were to consider destroyed Russian tanks only, the statistics could be equally reflective of Ukrainian effectiveness or Russian technological problems.³¹ Third, by comparing tanks with other Russian weapon types employed at the front, we can distinguish faulty tactical choices from a general lack of will to fight. Infantry Fighting Vehicles, for example, are deployed in similar proximity to the enemy as tanks, and we would expect them to be abandoned at the same rate as tanks, if fighting spirit were the problem.

Our hypothesis is borne out in the data on Russian equipment losses between 2022 and 2024. As seen in Figure 3, the share of abandoned tanks was higher than for other arms: 15.09 percent compared to only 9.75 percent for infantry vehicles. When looking at those data over time, we see that share had climbed to as high as 60 percent during the first six months of the invasion (Figure 4).

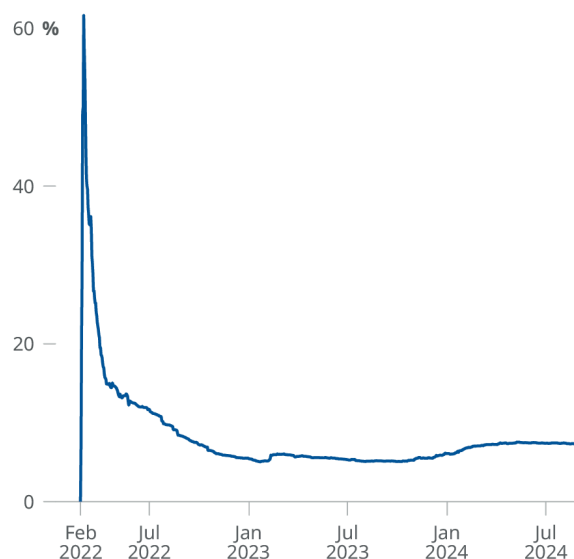
Some of the Russian military's organizational pathologies provide explanations: excessive secrecy and mistrust had led to tank units unable to plan for the logistical requirements the war plans demanded from them. And the dearth of infantry within Russian BTGs made their armoured components vulnerable to Ukrainian infantry.³²

Conclusion

Inequality makes it difficult for militaries to adopt modern tactics which explains, at least in part, the Russian Armed Forces' organizational pathologies and battlefield failures in Ukraine. Moreover, Russian military inequality has grown worse since 2022. The Kremlin's mobilization of rank and file mostly draws in people from less-affluent regions, ethnic minorities, and socially marginalized groups.³³ While some branches of the Russian military like artillery have become more tactically proficient over the course of the war, most new conscripts, recruits and mobilized soldiers stand a good chance of ending up as disposable infantry. Poorly trained, they can expect to simply be pushed to the frontline as cannon fodder to screen Ukrainian positions and guide fires from more professional forces.³⁴

But what does all this tell us about how the Russian military would fight another large-scale conflict in the near future? The scenarios of a blitzkrieg defeat, as discussed at the outset of this article were always predicated on two sets of assumptions: First, that NATO forces would be thinly spread and vastly inferior to the Russians in numbers and combat power. Here, NATO Allies have done much catching up. This includes detailed planning for the deterrence and defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area; a

Abandoned Systems as Share of Destroyed or Damaged



Cumulative Number of Abandoned, Damaged and Destroyed Systems

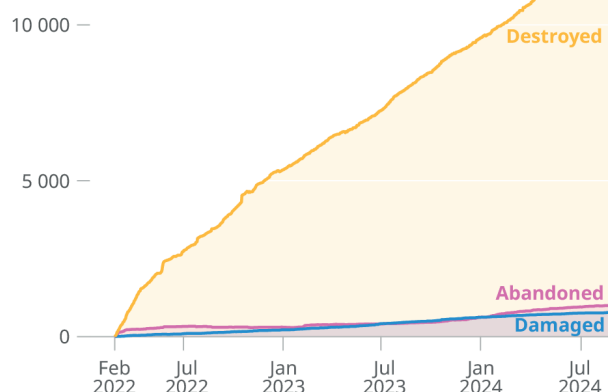


Figure 4. Source: Constructed by the authors using Oryx' dataset available at <https://www.kaggle.com/datasets/piterfm/2022-ukraine-russia-war-equipment-losses-oryx>

³⁰ Mike Martin, *How to fight a war*, (Hurst Publishers, 2023). See esp. p. 43 and 219.

³¹ Rob Lee, "The Tank is Not Obsolete. And Other Observations about the Future of Combat," *War on the Rocks*, 26 September 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/09/the-tank-is-not-obsolete-and-other-observations-about-the-future-of-combat/>.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ See e.g. European Union Agency for Asylum (EAAA), "The Russian Federation – Military Service, Country of Origin Information," 16 December 2022, <https://euaa.europa.eu/publications/russian-federation-military-service>.

³⁴ Jack Watling and Nick Reynolds, "Meatgrinder: Russian Tactics in the Second Year of Its Invasion of Ukraine," RUSI, 19 May 2023, 3-8. <https://static.rusi.org/403-SR-Russian-Tactics-web-final.pdf>.

re-organization of the Alliance’s posture and force pool for higher readiness; and investments in heavier capabilities and larger force structures. Among others, NATO Allies have put in place detailed defence plans for the various European sub-regions; deployed in all eight countries along its Eastern flank battle groups, which can rapidly be scaled up to brigade size; re-organized their force structure through the NATO Force Model so that up to 100,000 forces would be available within the critical 10 days after a crisis erupts; and stepped up investment in pre-dominantly heavy, high-end forces.³⁵

A second assumption was that the Russian forces would be able to implement modern tactics and conduct dispersed manoeuvres and combined arms warfare. A 2021 scenario study, for instance, described a combined arms force centred around the 1st Guards Tank Army whose commanders would “advance aggressively under heavy artillery, supported by attack helicopters, fixed-wing close air support, cyber-attacks and Electronic Warfare,” all while Spetsnaz units “carried out attacks against critical nodes and infrastructure, striking deep inside Baltic territory.”³⁶ As we have argued, the deep-rooted inequality and associated institutional rot in the Russian Armed Forces cast doubt on this: Russia lacks the necessary high-quality forces to implement modern tactics. The 1983 verdict by American political scientist John Mearsheimer about the Red Army still stands: “[I]nitiative and flexibility [...] cannot [...] be willed into existence. Their absence is largely the result of powerful historical forces. Fundamental structural change in Soviet society and the military would be necessary before flexibility and initiative will increase significantly.”³⁷

As a result, a blitzkrieg could be nipped in the bud. Even a reconstituted Russian force would have difficulties to launch a “*coup de main*” and decisively annihilate NATO in North-Eastern Europe within little time. However, our analysis shows that the Alliance must also prepare for a different, but equally difficult scenario: a drawn-out war of attrition. In Ukraine, Moscow has found ways to compensate for its forces’ lack of human and social capital. Instead of modern tactics, Vladimir Putin now bets on exhausting Kyiv: a larger population, faster mobilization, and a bigger defence industry allow Russia to mass fires and men against Ukrainian defences.³⁸ Looking at future contingencies, NATO must prepare for a similar destruction-based approach. Rather than seeking NATO’s military defeat through a quick and decisive operation,

Moscow may instead aim to systematically inflict military losses and civilian casualties along a broad front, at scale and in a sustained manner. Such wars of attrition are decided in favour of the side whose forces can inflict and absorb more casualties, whose industries can replace equipment faster, and whose populations can endure more hardships. Convincing Moscow that it will not win such a war is crucial for the effectiveness of NATO’s deterrence.

Annex: Table 1 ordered probit regression coefficients: military inequality and modern tactics Adoption

	Model 1	Model 2
Mil. Inequality Index= “moderate”	-0.891*** (0.266)	-1.281*** (0.450)
Mil. Inequality Index= “high”	-1.173* (0.713)	-5.987*** (0.491)
# of Ethnic Groups		0.111** (0.050)
GDP per Capita (log)		0.992*** (0.246)
Education Level		-0.001* (0.0006)
Polity Score		-0.021 (0.020)
/cut1	-0.383*** (0.132)	5.795*** (1.591)
/cut2	0.665*** (0.138)	7.369*** (1.739)
Pseudo R-sq	0.056	0.297
Observations	124	73

Note: Dependent variable: Modern Tactics Adoption (0 “low,” 1 “moderate,” 2 “high”); reference category for Mil. Inequality Index is “perfect equality”; Robust standard errors in parentheses; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

35 See e.g. John R. Deni, “The New NATO Force Model: Ready for Launch?”, *Outlook* 4/2024, NATO Defense College, May 2024, <https://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=1937>.
36 Hooker Jr. (2020): 92.
37 John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Cornell University Press, 1983), 185-186.
38 Jack Watling and Nick Reynolds, “Russian Military Objectives and Capacity in Ukraine Through 2024,” *RUSI*, 13 February 2024, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russian-military-objectives-and-capacity-ukraine-through-2024>.

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