

One month of Ukraine's invasion of Russia's Kursk region

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One month into Ukraine's invasion of Russia's Kursk region, Moscow has yet to repel Kiev's forces. President Vladimir Putin, whose government failed to prevent the first seizure of Russian territory by an army since World War II, is attempting to manage the debacle.

Speaking on Thursday, the Kremlin leader insisted that "the enemy has not succeeded" in its goal to compel the redeployment of soldiers away from the Donbass. The Russian military has now "stabilized the situation" and "begun to gradually squeeze the enemy out of the border territories," Putin stated. Invoking Russian nationalism and attempting to manage deep popular anger over the government's failure, he declared the liberation of Kursk to be the country's "sacred duty."

On the ground, Ukraine's advance appears to have been halted and possibly even slightly rolled back. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who rules with ever-more authoritarian methods over a country whose working population is increasingly opposed to the war, claims his forces currently control 1000 square kilometers of Russian territory. If true, this would be a decrease of 200 square kilometers from what Kiev said it initially seized when its troops and tanks pushed past Russia's poorly defended borders on August 6.

The Kremlin has been silent about the amount of territory it has lost. Speaking to school students in Tuva, Siberia, this week, President Putin described Ukraine's military as "thugs who made it in to Russia," as if the elite forces armed by the Western powers and trained by the British were akin to a bunch of roving bandits attacking a wagon train. His government has sought to emphasize the successes of its intensifying assault in the Donbass, where, even according to pro-Ukrainian Western media accounts, Kiev's army is struggling.

In an article on Thursday, the *New York Times* described Ukraine's military situation as "increasingly difficult." Russian forces have managed to create a "a large bulge

that extends about 20 miles deep through the center of Ukraine's defenses," it noted. The Washington press outlet *The Hill* warned the same day that Kiev's "gamble against Russia risks becoming a blunder." A September 2 article in *Foreign Affairs* by Michael Kofman and Rob Lee likewise expressed concern over Zelensky's "thinly-stretched lines" and ability to rotate troops out of the Donbass in order to hold onto Russian territory.

The Kremlin claims Ukraine has lost 10,000 troops in Kursk. If even 20 percent true, would be a large share of the 10,000 to 15,000 soldiers—largely drawn from elite forces—that Kofman and Lee estimate Kiev sent in.

President Zelensky is using its invasion of Kursk and the pressure building on its military—internally and at the front—to demand ever-more weapons from its Western backers and get authorization to launch attacks deeper into Russia. Ukraine's seizure of Russian territory demonstrates, Zelensky stated in late August, that Putin's "red lines" are an illusion not to be taken seriously.

The same point was made earlier this week by anti-Putin Russian oligarch, Mikhail Khodorkovsky—one of a number of contenders for power should the current occupant of the Kremlin be overthrown. Braying for war, he criticized the Western powers from the right, that is, for not acting rapidly enough on the fact that the Kursk invasion shows that "any red lines are not where [they] imagine them to be."

The Zelensky government is now receiving the go-ahead from NATO to escalate. On Thursday, Jans Stoltenberg, head of the alliance, welcomed the lessening of Western restrictions on Ukraine hitting targets in Russia and endorsed the country's use of long-range missiles. The following day, at a meeting of the imperialist powers and Zelensky at Germany's Ramstein air base, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin announced another \$250 million military aid package for Kiev.

Whatever the short-term outcome for Ukraine on the

battlefield, the imperialist powers see in Russia's debacle in Kursk an immense opportunity to advance their goals to carve up the entire country. This was spelled out in an article by political scientist Mark Katz, a fellow at both the Wilson Center and the Atlantic Council, in the *National Interest* this week.

"By itself," he writes, "the Ukrainian occupation of Russian territory in Kursk may not discomfit Putin for long. But if it leads other actors to conclude that Ukraine's Kursk offensive shows that Putin is unable to respond effectively to whatever they are contemplating, then Putin and his generals could find themselves overwhelmed with crises." Katz went on to question the Kremlin's ability to hold Chechnya, all the Muslim republics in Russia's North Caucasus, Belarus, and Transnistria, the Moscow-allied breakaway region of Moldova.

Domestically, the Russian government is working to downplay the crisis in Kursk. News coverage of the region would give one the impression that life is, more or less, moving along swimmingly and the situation for civilians is under control. Recent press articles have highlighted orchestra concerts, computer classes for kids, the opening of a photo exhibit of great moments in the country's military history, and the visit this week by a deputy minister to the region's main agricultural university. Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin recently announced tax and insurance deferments for businesses in the area, Health Minister Mikhail Murashko just declared that the oblast is completely stocked with medicines, medical equipment, and blood supplies, and the government has reportedly already distributed 10,000-ruble payments (\$110) to 120,000 evacuees. This is a paltry sum that only covers about two thirds of the over 180,000 people who had to flee the invasion.

Social media posts suggest that the reality, particularly for those caught behind the front lines, is appalling. A recent petition posted on the social media site Vkontakte appealed to the government to rescue people trapped in six villages who are, according to the appeal's author, "without water, medicine, light and gas, and will soon be without food and the ability to heat their homes." The petition, which was signed by 1,000 people within the first 24 hours that it was posted, reads, "This is a cry for help from your people to you! Do not abandon your people, who have made their choice in your favor! Please make your choice in favor of the people too!"

Hundreds, if not thousands, are missing. The search-and-rescue non-profit LizaAlert issued a statement this week

indicating that of 918 reports it received of friends and relatives feared to be lost in Ukrainian-controlled territory, 698 were still unaccounted for and 5 were found dead. On Friday, RIA-Novosti carried a story of Kursk residents searching for their loved ones, with flyers of missing persons now being posted at bus stops. One man, who reported that his friend had not had contact with his parents since August 10, told the press outlet, "They said then that they were going to the farm to shelter from shelling, and that's all."

A video surfaced in mid-August documenting the abuse of a bewildered elderly man walking down the road in rags. He tells the Ukrainian soldiers, "I'm lost, I've been trying for five days now..." Wearing helmets of the Nazi SS, they taunt him and say, "Go drink vodka." "Russian pig," they declare in German. The family of the man, identified as 74-year-old Aleksandr Gusarov, saw the video, but reported that he was still missing at the time. The Ukrainian military is awash with far-right, pro-fascist, anti-Russian forces, who embrace the great crimes and collaborators of the Nazi war against the Soviet Union in which 27 million Soviet citizens were killed.

From a historical standpoint, the ruling class of Russia bears as much responsibility for what is happening in Kursk as the invading Ukrainian army and its NATO backers. In 1991, the ex-Soviet bureaucrats turned capitalists dissolved the Soviet Union and with it what remained of the conquests of the Russian revolution. This meant not just liquidating nationalized property and turning it into a huge well of profits for a new elite, but breaking apart the USSR, unleashing fratricidal nationalism, and transforming the entire region into an object of conquest for the imperialists.

The invasion of Kursk bears out the fact that, notwithstanding their combination of appeals to Russian chauvinism and threats of unleashing nuclear annihilation, the country's ruling oligarchy is concerned primarily with the protection of its assets. Fearing nothing more than a mobilization of the working class, which would not only target the imperialist powers but also the capitalist system, it is both unwilling and unable to defend the working class against the onslaught of imperialism.



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