



INSIGHTS

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The Art of Partisan Warfare Is Not Dead: How old Russian military theories can give new insight into resistance to occupation in Ukraine

As part of its ongoing efforts to help scholars and practitioners understand Russia's approach to irregular warfare (IW), the Irregular Warfare Center (IWC) translated a [33-page Russian special operations journal article](#), *The Fundamentals of Partisan Warfare: Theory and Practice*. The translation of the Russian article is now available for request on the IWC website. This Insights article is the second of a two-part series meant to introduce the Russian text and analyze the concepts contained within in the context of the current conflict in Ukraine.

For both Ukrainians and Russians, the concept of partisan warfare is not new. Both countries have long histories of using irregular warfare to resist foreign invaders. As far back as the French invasion of Russia in 1812, Lieutenant Colonel Denis Davydov, who has been immortalized by Leo Tolstoy using him as the basis for the character Denisov in *War and Peace*, used guerilla warfare to stymie Napoleon's advance. During and after World War II, the [Ukrainian Insurgent Army \(UPA\)](#) fought first against the occupation of Ukraine by Nazi Germany and then against the Soviet regime. In both Ukraine and Russia, the term partisan (Russian/Ukrainian: Партизан) has become synonymous with tales of national heroes that are still celebrated today. It should come as no surprise that the topic has become a favorite for Russian military historians and theorists, from legendary Soviet war hero Colonel Ilya Starinov to Colonel Vladimir Kvachkov, who recently [provided the theoretical basis](#) for the "special military operation" in Ukraine.

One of these Russian theorists is Oleg Ryazanov, a Lieutenant Colonel of the Spetsnaz, who, in 2008, penned his monograph on *The Fundamentals of Partisan Warfare*, an extensive examination of Russian tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) related to partisan warfare and special operations forces (SOF) operations. This Insights article will begin by arguing that mastering the art of partisan warfare, as described by Ryazanov, remains as

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relevant today as ever. Then, it will illustrate this point by drawing direct parallels between Ryazanov's partisan warfare theories and the current conflict in Ukraine. The article will not focus on the special operations forces (SOF) portions of the Russian text. For a more in-depth analysis of those topics, please see the IWC's [previous Insights article](#), titled *The Fall from Grace of Russian SOF: The Danger of Forgetting Lessons Learned*.

It should be noted here that, unlike how they are defined in U.S. doctrine, the concepts of resistance, insurgency, counterinsurgency, guerilla warfare, sabotage, and subversion are all combined by Ryazanov under the umbrella term of "partisan warfare." As a result, all of these concepts and more are examined in *Fundamentals*, with the addition of psychological operations, special operations, and unconventional warfare. To differentiate between different aspects of partisan warfare, Ryazanov uses his own terms, such as "partisan conflict" to refer to insurgencies, "partisan movement" to refer to popular resistance, and "urban partisans" to refer to underground resistance. For the sake of clarity, however, this Insights article will use U.S. military definitions to distinguish between concepts. The terms partisan warfare and irregular warfare will be used interchangeably.

Writing fifteen years ago, Ryazanov predicted that there have been "cardinal changes that have taken place in recent years in military affairs...[leading to a] new essence and nature of war in the modern world." In his opinion, the Russian military's focus on conventional warfare was no longer adequate to address the full spectrum of threats faced by the Russian state. A new military doctrine needed to be created that put the focus firmly on partisan (irregular) warfare as future conflicts would become increasingly irregular in nature.

In Ryazanov's eyes, the primary adversary that Russia must prepare for was clear, and he dedicated a significant portion of his monograph to analyzing this potential foe. He states "the adversary with dominance in the air, space, sea, and information technology is NATO (and, above all, the United States). The only possibly adequate way to achieve victory in such conditions is a partisan (sabotage) war." Yet, despite Ryazanov's warnings, Russia has allowed itself to be mired in a protracted, large-scale war in Ukraine and has once again [shifted to prioritizing conventional methods](#) over unconventional ones. This occurred even though the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014 demonstrated that the partisan warfare described by Ryazanov, such as Russia's use of covert special operations, private military companies, and information warfare, can, [given the right conditions](#), be used to prepare a territory for invasion while avoiding a large-scale conflict.

So, does this mean that Ryazanov was mistaken? Should nations building resiliency against invasion once again focus on large-scale combat as opposed to irregular activities? This Insights article argues that the [lackluster results](#) that the Russian military has demonstrated in Ukraine, both during its initial invasion and its subsequent occupation of Ukrainian territories, can instead be used to validate many of Ryazanov's theories. As the Russian author puts it, "the art of partisan warfare, of course, includes its own tactical, operational, and strategic art... that disdains repetition and always surprises the enemy with unique solutions." Those countries that succeed in preparing and incorporating the art of partisan warfare into their national defense strategies will find themselves best situated to have a strategic advantage in future conflicts. Meanwhile, those that do not account for the "surprises" and "unique solutions" that irregular warfare entails will find themselves ill-prepared to face future threats.

Several questions discussed in *Fundamentals of Partisan Warfare* stand out as especially relevant to the current situation in Ukraine and can serve as good starting points for further discussion on the topic. These include, but are not limited to: what tactics can an underground resistance employ when faced with a stronger foe? What factors are crucial in determining the success of a resistance movement? And, finally, is there a possibility of an insurgency occurring on Russian soil?

The Ukrainian resistance in territories currently occupied by Russia has primarily taken the form of what Ryazanov calls "urban partisans," even though the more precise term would be an underground resistance (resistance in Ukraine has not been limited to urban areas). One of the key features of an underground resistance that distinguishes it from traditional forms of guerilla warfare is the need for members to [maintain a cover identity](#) as regular citizens. As a result, the types of resistance activities they engage in must always be balanced with the risk of exposure. According to Ryazanov, "Partisan[s]...operating in cities must achieve strictly defined

objectives, limited in scope...The main objectives achieved by such detachments are as follows: the elimination of government officials, military, police, and propagandists of the ruling regime; expropriations; sabotage and diversions; providing protection for acts of civil disobedience; and intelligence.”

When analyzing the actions of the Ukrainian resistance in occupied territories, the tactics employed closely mirror those predicted by Ryazanov. Partisans (or Ukrainian SOF under the guise of partisans) have successfully [engaged in sabotage attacks](#), with railway and highway supply lines being [prime targets](#). The Ukrainian resistance has also taken credit for assassinations of Russian-appointed officials and Ukrainian collaborators in occupied areas, such as the [assassination of a pro-Russian mayor](#) in Luhansk region in March 2022. Finally, the partisans’ ability to [provide intelligence](#) on the positions of Russian military installations and troops has proven invaluable. This critical information is sent to the Ukrainian military for use in targeting for raids and missile strikes. It is important to note, however, that while these efforts have had an impact, they have also come at great human sacrifice, as many of these individuals conducting urban partisan or resistance operations in occupied territories get captured by Russian forces and are either [deported or “disappeared.”](#) Further refinement of resistance tradecraft in occupied territories and additional preparation time before an invasion can, given time, reduce these costs.

Compared to the subsequent mixed results of the underground resistance to the occupation, Ukraine demonstrated great competence in using traditional partisans to conduct guerilla actions during the initial invasion. Ukraine was significantly more prepared for militarized resistance to invasion since it was the [primary focus of Western SOF-provided training](#) prior to the war. However, the skills learned in traditional, military partisan training [turned out to be insufficient](#) to prepare for civilian, clandestine partisan activities. The lessons learned from the successes and failures of the Ukrainian resistance, along with the analysis of past conflicts, such as the Chechen Wars, from a Russian perspective, can help [improve resilience and resistance](#) preparations in the future.

Another salient point discussed in Ryazanov’s article is the factors that determine whether a resistance succeeds or fails. The prolific activity of the Ukrainian resistance provides a valuable case study of how, with careful planning and preparation, a nation can create the necessary groundwork for resistance to invasion and occupation. However, it also shows that for these measures to have maximum effect, they must be done years in advance. The effectiveness of resistance can also be impacted by both internal and external factors. Ryazanov identifies that, “if talking about conducting a partisan struggle against a foreign aggressor...an important factor is the results of the regular army’s combat operations on the main front and the level of preparedness of the nation to conduct a partisan conflict.” Russia’s underestimation of these two key factors in Ukraine and the inconsistent approach that it has taken to counter-resistance has led to a [failure to fully quell](#) the resistance in occupied areas, even after more than a year of occupation.

A critical mistake during Russia’s invasion was [the assumption](#) that Russian forces would be welcomed with open arms by local populations and that resistance levels to the invasion and occupation would be minimal. Instead, the Ukrainian population showed an incredible willingness to resist a stronger foe, even [exceeding the expectations](#) of some Western observers. In addition, Ukraine succeeded in halting the Russian advance and even scored some major victories, such as the [retaking of the city of Kherson](#) in November of last year. This has prevented Russia from fully focusing its forces on suppressing the resistance, and it also provides a much-needed morale boost for resistance fighters. According to Ryazanov, the Ukrainian resistance will maintain an advantage as long as the main force continues to succeed. However, this reliance also presents an important weakness for the resistance. If the main force fails to produce results on the battlefield, it might negatively impact the morale of resistance members. In turn, they might be less willing to engage in activities that have a risk of exposure, such as passing on information on Russian troop positions. Had Russian troops been successful at occupying Ukraine on a larger scale, this and [other weaknesses](#) of the Ukrainian underground elements may have proven decisive.

Discussion of the factors needed for successful resistance can also help explain why the results of resistance were so different in 2014, when Russia succeeded in its primary goal of capturing and illegally annexing Crimea and parts of the eastern Donbas region, and in 2022, when the invasion failed to achieve its primary goal of taking Kyiv. As noted by Ryazanov, the level of preparation of a nation to mount a resistance, both civil and

military, plays a major role. In 2014, Russian special operators, working in the shadows, [successfully created the necessary pre-conditions](#) so that the subsequent invasion and annexation would go as smoothly as possible, with information operations being a crucial aspect. At the time, Ukraine was not fully prepared to face this strategy. However, by the time of the Russian invasion in February 2022, the situation was different. The preparations of the Ukrainian government and citizenry, the development of a legal framework for resistance, and the increased availability and effectiveness of man-portable weapons (another key factor predicted by Ryazanov), among other reasons, made Ukraine much more prepared to organize and conduct a successful resistance to invasion. In addition, professional training in resistance tactics and operations was given by NATO experts to volunteers across the country. While there were some mishaps in Ukraine's approach, notably the [lack of plans for a worst-case scenario](#), such as the full occupation of Ukraine or in which the Kyiv government would be eliminated or forced to leave the country, Ukraine's preparations proved better suited for a partisan war than those of Russia. Unlike its adversary, Ukraine did not underestimate its opponent and used its past experiences from the invasion of 2014 to prepare resilience and resistance specially tailored to counter Russian aggression, including IW techniques such as information operations.

Finally, Ryazanov puts forth the possibility of a partisan conflict occurring on Russian soil, an idea that recent events have made increasingly relevant. Writing in 2008, Ryazanov fully expected that Chechnya would not be the last insurgency that Russia would face, writing:

“Yet, let us not forget the bloody experience of fighting in Chechnya. It is quite possible that this ‘low-intensity conflict’ will not be the last one on Russian territory. And this, in turn, means that it is necessary to work out scenarios such as military operations against irregular armed formations. In this case, the fight [will be] against partisan, insurgent, and other irregular armed formations, as well as against sabotage and intelligence units, and detachments of foreign army special operations forces...”

Recent events in Russia suggest that Ryazanov's warnings may have been accurate. Groups of Russian fighters trained and supported by Ukraine, such as the Russian Volunteer Corps and the Freedom of Russia Legion, have engaged in [cross-border raids from Ukraine into Russian cities](#). In June, the Russian private military company, Wagner Group, which fits Ryazanov's definition of an “other irregular armed formation,” [held an armed march on Moscow](#), albeit a short-lived one. Even though these events fall short of a full-scale insurgency, they have made the possibility of further such escalation a plausible threat, one that will likely, as Ryazanov predicted, be supported by Ukrainian intelligence and special operations forces. If such a scenario were to develop, it remains to be seen how well prepared the Russian government is to counter a major irregular threat coming from within its own borders.

In conclusion, Russia's invasion of Ukraine reinforces the importance of partisan and counter-partisan warfare as a core aspect of modern IW, whether it is in resistance to invasion and occupation or in support of insurgency/counter-insurgency operations in foreign countries. The countries that succeed in preparing and incorporating the art of partisan warfare into their national defense strategies will find themselves best situated to have a strategic advantage in future conflicts. Today, this is already being done in many NATO nations, including the Baltic States and Poland, as well as other countries such as Moldova, Georgia, Taiwan, and Mongolia. A key aspect of this preparation will be understanding historical case studies, such as the Second Chechen War, and the clues they can reveal on how aggressors such as Russia plan to conduct future irregular warfare operations. In this regard, the study of past works of Russian military thought on the subject, such as the article translated by the IWC, can prove invaluable. Through its Translations initiative, the IWC will continue to bring such documents to light for the use of policymakers, practitioners, and scholars.

The views expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Department of Defense, Defense Security Cooperation Agency, or the Irregular Warfare Center.