

Ukraine: The Outlook

by GWYNNE DYER

'I've said before, you do the right thing and you let the chips fall where they may,' said Mike Johnson, the Speaker of the US House of Representatives. The chips being the ten- or twenty-thousand extra Ukrainians who died needlessly during the six months when the Republican Party blocked the sending of any more US military aid to Ukraine.

To be fair, that's a fuzzy number. Neither side issues regular updates on military casualties, and Ukrainian civilian deaths from Russian bombs, shells and rockets are only about 11,000 in the past 26 months. However, Ukrainian military deaths have at least doubled since the US Congress stopped sending artillery shells and other weapons six months ago.

To be even fairer, a significant number of Republican members of the House support Ukraine, and only a small number are actively pro-Russian. (The rest are simply isolationists or are cowed by Donald Trump, who does favour the Russians.) Johnson may lose his job for defying the hard-liners in his own party, but they cannot reverse Saturday's vote.

The Senate has come back from recess to approve the amended House vote, which authorises \$61 billion in military aid to Ukraine. President Biden will sign the bill before the end of this week, and the US armed forces claim that fresh supplies of 155 mm shells and other urgently needed kit will start reaching exhausted Ukrainian troops by next week.

Is that soon enough to avert collapse? Probably, but it has been a very near-run thing. As the US-supplied munitions ran out, the Russians have been able to fire ten shells for every one expended by the Ukrainians ? and since the fighting increasingly resembles First World War-style artillery duels with added electronics, that gave the Russians the upper hand.

'We are trying to find some way not to retreat,' said Ukraine's President Volodymyr recently, but in fact they are retreating. They lost Andriivka in February after holding the front line there for two years, and since then the Russians have advanced to the suburbs of Chasiv Yar, the last high ground held by the Ukrainians in Donetsk province.

The Russians have been building up for a big June offensive, but they might launch it early in the hope of breaking through before the US arms arrive. That would probably be a mistake, however, because the rasputitsa (?mud season?) that makes off-road movement by vehicles almost impossible is now often lasting into early May due to global warming.

So, if the renewed American military aid prevents a Russian victory at least until the end of 2024 ? and if Donald Trump does not return as president next January ? what are Ukraine's chances of surviving over the longer term as an independent country?

If the analogy of the First World War is relevant, then the next step, for one side or the other, is military mutiny and/or political collapse.

So far the analogy has held up quite well. A first few months of rapid movement (August 1914/March 2022) is rapidly followed by a surprise shift into trench warfare and stalemate. This lasts for three years, punctuated by occasional big offensives that cause high casualties but gain little or no ground.

And then, by mid-to-late 1917, the sheer futility of the war has undermined morale so badly that the armies start to mutiny or just collapse. The Russians leave the war entirely and have a revolution instead. The French and Italian armies mutiny and their officers dare not order any more offensives.

The equivalent point on our 21st-century Ukraine War timeline would be early next year. True, the analogy is far from perfect, but that's a problem with all historical analogies. This war directly involves only two countries, not all the great powers, but the experience of the soldiers is very similar ? and it was the soldiers who mutinied in 1917, not the generals.

Which side will collapse first this time around? Hard to say. There has already been one mutiny in the Russian forces. (Prigozhin's aborted putsch last June). He was duly killed for his presumption, but he came close enough to success to inspire others.

Ukrainian morale has already taken a battering because of the capricious stop-and-start character of US military and financial aid, and Ukrainian soldiers will always face three-to-one odds or worse because of their country's smaller population. 'Gallant little Ukraine,' is a great slogan, but God (as Voltaire remarked) 'is on the side of the Big Battalions.'

All that this analogy can tell us, therefore, is that the war is unlikely to be decided by a military victory for either side. It will probably be settled by which side's soldiers get sick of it first ? and if you are not actually living amongst them, you cannot know how close either side is to that point.