The Central Research institute
of the Armed Forces of Ukraine

Military Science. Vol. 3 No. 1 (2025)

The path of a military leader: The historical combat experience of the Commander-in-Chief Prior to the start of a large-scale invasion (2014–2022)

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Abstract. The relevance of this article is to familiarise the general public with the combat biography of a representative of a new generation of military leaders who have been hardened in combat since 2014, to build public confidence in the top military leadership of Ukraine and to refute fakes about ‘parquet generals who do not know how to fight’.

Today, an equally fierce struggle for the minds of Ukrainians is taking place in the information space, which necessitates active counteraction.

The large amount of information in open sources, which can sometimes be contradictory in content due to the intensification of information and psychological operations during the war, requires critical analysis and awareness, selection, promotion and dissemination of objective information, true facts and refutation of enemy narratives.

The targets of information attacks in times of war are primarily representatives of the highest military and political leadership of the state, including the Commander-in-Chief and combat commanders. The enemy takes all sorts of measures to discredit them in society.

The need to protect the command from actual and potential information attacks is becoming an important element in preserving unity in Ukraine in confronting the aggressor.

The level of awareness of the personnel of the Defence Forces and the citizens of Ukraine about their command and the top political leadership should be significantly improved and become an element of the state information policy involving all types of media, including electronic and social networks.

Awareness of General Oleksandr Syrskyi's combat past and successes in combat operations allows us to teach a new generation of commanders of all levels on examples of resilience, courage, out-of-the-box thinking and the ability to make independent decisions in a dynamic change in the operational situation that requires quick and competent command decisions.

Keywords: general Oleksandr Syrskyi, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO), russian-Ukrainian war (2014), Debaltseve, Minsk Agreements, Joint Forces Operation (JFO), NATO standards, reform of the Land Forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

Introduction

General Oleksandr Stanislavovych Syrskyi is the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. He is directly provide command of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. He became widely known to civilian Ukrainians after his appointment to this position, but General Oleksandr Syrskyi began his combat career in defending Ukraine long before the full-scale invasion, particularly in 2014, at the beginning of the russian-Ukrainian war.

Methodological Framework

The article uses materials from open sources available to the wide public, some military's memories who personally knew General O. Syrskyi, followed his orders and directives during the mentioned period, and brief information from his biography to understand his growth as a military leader. The proposed study is based on changes in the formation of a military leader as a commander in an asymmetric war with an enemy that does not adhere to the Geneva Convention and does not follow the rules of warfare.

Results and Discussions

The growth of Oleksandr Syrskyi as a military leader was influenced by many factors in his life and military career until 2014. To understand this, it is necessary to look at the key milestones in the combat general's biography.

Oleksandr Syrskyi was born on 26 July 1965 in the village of Novynky, Vladimir Oblast, USSR. In 1986, he graduated from the Moscow Higher Combined Arms Command School. Oleksandr Syrskyi began his officer service as a motorised rifle platoon commander in 1986 in Lubny, Poltava region. After the USSR collapsed, he continued his service in the Armed Forces of Ukraine. In 1996, he graduated with honours from the Academy of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (operational and tactical level). He was the commander of the 72nd Separate Mechanised Brigade

based in Bila Tserkva.

In 2006, Oleksandr Syrskyi graduated with a gold medal from the Operational and Strategic Faculty of the National Defence Academy of Ukraine and headed the Operations Planning Directorate of the Joint Operational Command (JOC) of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, which was established a year earlier to bring it in step closer to achieving NATO standards. After a year of service, he became Chief of Staff - First Deputy Commander of the Joint Operational Command of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. After the election of President Viktor Yanukovych and the return to the new government's pro-Russian course, the JFO was liquidated. Since then, he has served in positions in the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. In particular, in 2011-2012, he was the First Deputy Chief of the Main Directorate of Military Cooperation and Peacekeeping Operations of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

The beginning of combat actions in the East of Ukraine (2014). ATO.

With the beginning of the russian aggression in the East of Ukraine in 2014, Oleksandr Syrskyi actively contributed to the country's defence, holding key command positions. With the beginning of combat actions in the East of Ukraine, he became the Chief of Staff of the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO).

In the winter of 2015, during the battle for Debaltseve, Major General Oleksandr Syrskyi was one of the main commanders of the ATO forces and, together with the Chief of the General Staff – Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine Viktor Muzhenko, travelled directly to Debaltseve. During the battles for Vuhlehirsk, in the Ridkodub village and the attempt to recapture Lohvynove, he was directly involved in the troop's command.

Under his command, the possible ways to cross the Karapulka River were blown up. However, according to the general, the head of the sector did not allow all the explosions to be carried out, which is why the crossings were captured by the enemy. Further, the Bars tactical group formed by O. Syrskyi covered the withdrawal of the Armed Forces of Ukraine from Debaltseve in order to avoid complete encirclement. This was the beginning of General Oleksandr Syrskyi's combat path.

Such actions allowed for the organised withdrawal of troops from the encirclement, minimising the loss of personnel and vehicles. At that time, he was commanding about 4,500 military personnel, who were facing up to 20,000 russian troops with heavy armour ‘without a flag’, i.e. concealing their belonging to the russian armed forces. At the Minsk negotiations on 12 February 2015, an agreement was reached that a ceasefire would start on 15 February. At that time, the russian president was delaying the negotiations as much as possible in order not to sign Minsk-2 until his battalion tactical groups had finally captured Debaltseve, which, according to the agreement, was to remain under the control of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

In one of his interviews, describing the events near Debaltseve, Oleksandr Syrskyi drew conclusions that remain relevant today, 11 years after the russian-Ukrainian war began: *“First and foremost, it is the nature of the enemy's actions and way of thinking. And it should not be as underestimated or overestimated. In the confrontation with the russian federation, we must take into account the guile and disregard for the basic rules of warfare, which, unfortunately, we realised from our own experience quite late.*

As an example of the events during the Debaltseve operation, I can point out the following: despite the agreements reached in Minsk on a ceasefire from 00.00 on 15 February 2015, pro-russian militants, supported by regular units of the russian armed forces, not only fired on the positions of our troops with tanks, artillery and multiple launch rocket systems, but also systematically carried out assault operations, trying to capture base camps, strong points and checkpoints, and attacked civilian targets in the localities.

Of particular importance were the measures of psychological influence by the russian

federation. The enemy made wide application of information and psychological operations units. At that time, Ukrainian military personnel received targeted SMS messages with threats and demands to surrender their positions. The relatives and friends of our military also received similar SMS messages.

Here I would like to return to the issue of restricting the use of mobile phones by military personnel during combat missions. After all, it is often exactly mobile communication devices that expose our positions, which leads to losses of personnel and vehicles...'



Figure 1. Lieutenant General Oleksandr Syrskyi (centre) led the battles in Vuhlehirsk, the Ridkodub village and during the attempt to recapture Lohvynove. Photo: ATO Staff Press Centre, Taras Hren

By the President of Ukraine's Decree No. 144/2015 of 14 March 2015, Oleksandr Syrskyi was awarded by the Bohdan Khmelnytskyi III Class Order for personal courage and high professionalism in defending Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity during the fighting at the Debaltseve bridgehead, and later promoted to the rank of Lieutenant General.

In 2016, Oleksandr Syrskyi became the head of the Joint Operational Headquarters of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, which coordinated the activities of different security forces in Donbas.

In 2017, Lieutenant General Oleksandr Syrskyi was appointed Commander of the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) in eastern Ukraine. In this position, he continued the work he had started in previous years to stabilise the situation in the conflict zone and increase the combat capability of Ukrainian troops, and was responsible for strategic planning and conducting operations aimed at deterring aggression and restoring control over the occupied territories.

Although the specific operations conducted under Oleksandr Syrskyi's leadership in 2017 were not widely covered in the public space, his activities as ATO commander were aimed at effectively deterring enemy forces. The commander was actively involved in organising exercises and training for the units involved in the ATO, which helped to increase their readiness to perform combat missions. He was personally visiting the frontline, which was atypical for ATO/JFO commanders, demonstrating support for his personnel and ensuring effective leadership on the ground.

Thanks to his effective command and coordination of the units' actions, it was possible to hold the demarcation line and prevent the enemy's advance, while improving defensive positions. Under

his leadership, work was carried out to strengthen the defensive lines, which increased the Ukrainian troops' security, increased their resilience to possible attacks and reduced losses from enemy fire, which systematically violated the Minsk agreements.

Another achievement under his leadership was the development and improvement of interaction between units. Oleksandr Syrskyi helped to improve coordination between different military arms and security bodies, organised effective interaction, which ensured coordinated actions during performing combat missions.

In general, Oleksandr Syrskyi's activities as the ATO Commander in 2017 were aimed at strengthening the troops' positions, improving their training and ensuring stability in the conflict zone.

Joint Forces Commander (May - August 2019).

Between May and August 2019, Lieutenant General Oleksandr Syrskyi served as the Commander of the Joint Forces Operation (JFO) in the east of Ukraine. Launched in April 2018, the operation was aimed at countering the activities of russian and pro-russian armed formations in Donetsk and Luhansk regions and acquired the characteristics of a military operation rather than an anti-terrorist operation, which significantly increased its effectiveness.

As the JFO Commander, Oleksandr Syrskyi organised round-the-clock monitoring and analysis of the situation using video cameras. He constantly analysed the operational situation, which allowed him to respond to changes in the situation in a timely manner and make informed decisions quickly.

No significant combat operations were conducted during this period, due to compliance with the Minsk agreements. This made it possible to organise work to improve the combat readiness and training of the troops. Oleksandr Syrskyi was actively involved in organising exercises and training for the units involved in the ATO, which helped to increase their readiness to perform combat missions and prepare reserves. His activities were also aimed at deterring the enemy and conducting local operations.

Thanks to effective command, it was possible to hold the demarcation line and prevent the enemy's advance. The JFO units took measures to neutralise enemy sabotage and reconnaissance groups and ensure the safety of civilians. In general, Oleksandr Syrskyi's activities as the Joint Forces Commander during this period contributed to maintaining stability in the region and increasing the combat capability of Ukrainian troops. Under his leadership, a detailed instruction was developed for the actions of military personnel in the case of a ceasefire violation by the enemy.

Land Forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine Commander (August 2019)

On 5 August 2019, after Volodymyr Zelenskyy won the presidential election, Oleksandr Syrskyi was appointed Land Forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine Commander. In this position, he focused on reforming and modernising the Land Forces, improving the level of personnel's combat training and re-equipping units with modern armaments. Under his command, work was accelerated to implement NATO standards, modernise armaments and military equipment, and improve the personnel's professional training. These measures contributed to an increase the combat capability of our troops and their readiness to repel possible aggression. On 23 August 2020, Commander of the Land Forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine Oleksandr Syrskyi was promoted to the rank of Colonel General.

In July 2021, President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy dismissed the Minister of Defence of Ukraine Andrii Taran and the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine Ruslan Khomchak. The position of the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine was offered to Oleksandr Syrskyi, but he refused for ethical reasons... Valerii Zaluzhnyi was appointed to this position.

On the eve of a full-scale invasion (2021-2022).

Back in the autumn 2021, when the first information about a possible full-scale invasion by russian troops emerged from reliable sources, the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine Valerii Zaluzhnyi created a grouping to defend Kyiv and appointed Colonel-General Oleksandr Syrskyi as its commander. In December 2021, he inspected the 72nd Separate Mechanised Brigade, and in early February 2022, the brigade was placed under O. Syrskyi's direct command. On 21 February, the brigade received an order to move to Kyiv's defence, but the main area of attack was expected to be from the Chernihiv region, so the brigade's main forces were stationed on the left bank of the Dnipro. He also ordered the artillery to be relocated closer to Kyiv, and the aircraft to be withdrawn to alternate military sites to avoid russian attacks.

With the beginning of the full-scale invasion, Oleksandr Syrskyi became the leader of Kyiv's defence, but the article is about the General Syrskyi's combat path from 2014 to 24 February 2022

Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi played a key role in several successful military operations of Ukraine between 2014 and the 24th of February 2022. In addition to the above-mentioned battles for Debaltseve and his work as the Joint Forces Commander, it is worth mentioning his contribution to reforming and improving the combat capability of the Land Forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, implementing NATO standards, and training and educating officers according to new standards.

Conclusion

General Oleksandr Syrskyi made a significant contribution to the defence and security of Ukraine in the period from 2014 to 2022. His leadership, strategic vision and decisiveness contributed to the successful performance of complex military operations, which increased the country's defence capability and strengthened the morale of Ukrainian soldiers. The General should serve as a role model for young officers as the future commanders of the new generation.

His contribution to reforming and increasing the combat capability of the Land Forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, on the eve of a full-scale invasion, directly commanding the battles in the first days of the war became an important component of the defence resilience, rapid response to changes in the combat situation, counterattacks, prevented the aggressor from quickly capturing Kyiv and breaking the defence system of Ukraine.

During the russian-Ukrainian war since 2014, a whole generation of heroes has grown up in Ukraine, thanks to leaders such as General O. Syrskyi.

Access to objective information for both citizens of Ukraine and personnel of the Armed Forces of Ukraine regarding the state's top military and political leadership allows them to critically analyse large amounts of information and reject any attempts at disinformation by enemy propaganda.

Recommendations

Ukrainians know many facts about our victories in certain areas of the frontline, but very few know who made it happen and why this or that event took place. This allows the enemy to spread fake news and conduct information and psychological operations to discredit the military leadership and undermine confidence in the military personnel in general.

Under the conditions of the russian-Ukrainian war, in order to ensure national and patriotic education of young people who may join the Armed Forces of Ukraine tomorrow, more attention should be paid to glorifying the defenders of Ukraine, promoting respect for Ukrainian warriors from soldiers to generals among the entire civilian population, both at home and abroad, where a significant number of young Ukrainian citizens study in schools and educational institutions. There are thousands of heroic examples, but the state-controlled information space only partially pursues this information policy, which requires some correction.

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