

## DO WESTERN TANKS “BURN BEAUTIFULLY”? CLAIMS FOR SUPERIORITY IN ARMOR IN THE WAR IN UKRAINE

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*Abstract:* The article juxtaposes Russian versus Western claims for superiority in tanks and infantry fighting vehicles. The reported effectiveness of armor in the war in Ukraine has been interpreted as proof of civilizational and cultural superiority either of Russia or of the West. The text deals with political and media assessments of the main Russian and Western tanks and other armored vehicles, which roam on the fields in Ukraine, stories about battles, victories, and defeats and examples of biased depictions of the real events.

*Keywords:* civilization, infantry fighting vehicles, Russia, tanks, the West

### **I. Russia vs. the West: Clash of Civilizations?**

The war of Russia against Ukraine since Feb. 24, 2022 has not produced so far the initially anticipated Russian victory. Many Western countries have sent sophisticated weapons to Ukraine, which has led Russia to claim that it can find the proper answer for them and eventually achieve victory on the battlefields. The reported effectiveness of Russian weapons has also served as an alleged proof of cultural and civilizational superiority of Russia over the West. Military might and effective weapons are one of the major proofs for superiority of Western societies. Advanced fire arms, from rifles to cannons, are among the key reasons

Western countries defeated native populations of America, Africa, and Australia and colonized them.

Russia is the core country of the Orthodox civilization<sup>1</sup> and it has competed with the Western civilization for a long period of time. The Western sanctions against Russia and the military help to Ukraine have led the Russian political leadership to portray the conflict as war of the West against Russia and boosted Russian perceptions of the West as hostile and aggressive. The sanctions and Western sympathy to Ukraine have also stimulated the views, supported by the Russian political elite and media, that Russia is a separate civilization, the major rival to the West. And that the “Russian civilization” provides better model of society compared to the allegedly arrogant and decadent West. The notions of the uniqueness of Russia, Russia as “The Third Rome”, Russian messianism, the pride as the first socialist country in the world or the major victor in World War II have been deeply entrenched into Russian culture<sup>2</sup> and renewed in recent decades. The idea emphasized by the Russian political leadership that the West wants to destroy Russia helps the mobilization of the Russian society: public opinion polls since the start of the war demonstrate that between 70 and 80% of Russian citizens approve the actions of the Russian army in Ukraine and more than 80% support the rule of Vladimir Putin<sup>3</sup>.

Armenia, Belarus, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Cyprus, Moldova, Montenegro, Northern Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, and Ukraine have also adopted Orthodox Christianity as their traditional religion and they have shared some cultural traits with Russia. However, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Cyprus, and Northern Macedonia are already members of the European Union and/or NATO. Other Orthodox countries also try to join these Western unions despite cultural ties to the Orthodox civilization. Thus, Russia faces the challenge to maintain that its civilization is superior. One of the major Russian claims in that direction is the advancement in military sphere: better tanks, missiles, combat tactics, and war spirit. In contrast, Western political elites and media question this claim and insist that the Western arms are better.

The aim of the article is to analyze the Russian claims for military superiority over the West in the context of the war in Ukraine and to juxtapose them to the Western claims that the Western weapons and military technologies are better and they will help Ukraine repel the Russian army. The focus is on one of the important types of weapons – armored vehicles. Both Russia and the West use the notion of allegedly better tanks and other armored vehicles to imply civilizational superiority.

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<sup>1</sup> TOYNBEE, Arnold. *A Study of History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946; HUNTINGTON, Samuel. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> BERDYAEV, Nikolai. *The Origin of Russian Communism*. Glasgow: The University Press, 1955.

<sup>3</sup> Левада-Центр [online], 2024. Available from: <https://www.levada.ru>

War is a complex social phenomenon: military might depends on effective economy, advanced technologies, and optimal organization of society. The Mongols, the Chinese, and the Ottoman Turks were military superior in the past and achieved many victories against Europeans. However, the Western societies were able to defeat most of their adversaries on the battlefields since 1500.

Russia was a great power for about three centuries, 1700-1989: from the rule of Peter the Great to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The peak of its world dominance was the period from 1945 to 1989, when the Soviet Union was the leader of the socialist system in its struggle for superiority against the capitalist system led by the United States. The transition of Russia in the 1990s was painful but the rule of Vladimir Putin since 2000 has resurrected Moscow's ambitions to play a significant world role.

The Soviet Union tried to show to the West that the socialist society could successfully compete with capitalism in any sphere, particularly in military power. The Soviet leaders, military experts, historians, and media praised the Soviet tank T-34, the Katyusha multiple rocket launcher or victorious spirit of the Red Army as the major factors for the defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II. The Soviet propaganda during the Cold War insisted that Soviet weapons were more powerful and effective and they would provide victory in a potential war between the socialist and the capitalist system. Soviet planes, tanks and assault rifles were used in the Israeli-Arab Wars and the Vietnam War and the socialist propaganda at that time underlined their supposed effectiveness. The Soviet leaders used achievements in the exploration of space in their bid to support the claim for Soviet superiority over the West. Soviet and Russian weapons were used in the Gulf Wars and the Syrian Civil War.

The decision of the Russian political leadership to invade Ukraine has resurrected the old dispute: whether Russian or Western weapons are more effective, which is related to the core question of civilizational superiority.

## **II. Method**

The article is based on qualitative analysis of publications of Russian and Western media during the second year and the first half of the third year of the war in Ukraine: how they present weapons, battels, successes, and setbacks. For presenting the Russian point of view the attention is paid to the online publications of the RIA Novosti and TASS, the two Russian state news agencies. These messages would be juxtaposed to the online publications of the Associated Press and the British Broadcasting Corporation. The Western media are usually perceived as independent institutions; since the BBC is the public media of the United Kingdom, it could be assumed that it would be prone to communicate more

favorably the point of view of the British governments The Associated Press is a US news agency comparable to the RIA Novosti and TASS. The period of the study is from January 1, 2023 to June 30, 2024.

The superiority of weapons is tested in real battles. The aim of the article is to compare Russian and Western claims for military superiority and how they are supported in political statements and the media.

### **III. The Russian Culture of Military Superiority and Its Western Contention**

Russia was not able to defeat Ukraine easily since the start of the war on February 24, 2022, and experienced several military setbacks: from the failure to capture Kyiv early in the war to successful Ukrainian counteroffensives in Kharkov and Kherson regions in late summer and fall of 2022. Still, the Russian army has managed to capture vast territories in the east and south of Ukraine, consisting of the larger parts of Donetsk, Lugansk, Zaporizhia and Kherson regions.

Both Russia and Ukraine possess stocks of Soviet-era weapons and use them. Ukrainian tanks and artillery at the beginning of the war tended to be older, while the Russian forces possessed some modern weapons, developed after the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991. However, many of the Western countries have sent sophisticated weaponry to Ukraine. Western politicians, military experts, and media argue that Soviet weapons are obsolete and imprecise and that even the new Russian arms are ineffective as compared to the Western weapons given to Ukraine<sup>4</sup>. In contrast, the Russian political elite and media hold that Russian weapons are superior, Western weapons are not sufficiently effective and Russia is able to find answer to them. Statements by President Vladimir Putin about new Russian submarines, warships, or hypersonic missiles often claim that they are state of the art, without an analog in other countries and second to none<sup>5</sup>.

Russian leaders announced at the end of 2022 their goal to enlarge the army to 1.5 million people in 2023-2026, including 695,000 troops serving in contract<sup>6</sup>. The strength of the Russian army was raised to 1.15 million men at the

<sup>4</sup> BBC. Ukraine war: Is Europe doing enough to help against Russia?. BBC [online], 10.03.2024. Available from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-68514995>; BBC. Will using Western weapons on Russia help Ukraine change the war?. BBC [online], 02.06.2024. Available from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cjll1r1e15wo>; BBC. Two years into Russia's invasion, exhausted Ukrainians refuse to give up. BBC [online], 24.02.2024. Available from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-68384341>

<sup>5</sup> Президент России. Выход на боевую службу фрегата «Адмирал Горшков». Президент России [online], 04.01.2023. Available from: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70325>

<sup>6</sup> Минобороны России. Министр обороны России провел совещание по вопросам увеличения численности ВС РФ. Минобороны России [online], 17.01.2023. Available from: [https://function.mil.ru/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=12451669@egNews](https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12451669@egNews)

end of 2023 according to the Ministry of Defense of Russia<sup>7</sup>. Such an increase of the military might of the Russian Federation seems aimed at achieving ambitious political goals. The Russian plan has included the establishment of two new military regions (around Moscow and St Petersburg) and the creation of an army corps in Karelia. These measures have been taken in order to counter Finland and Sweden, the two new members of NATO.

The ability of the Russian army to prevent Ukrainian counteroffensive since June 2023 from success has boosted Kremlin's culture of military superiority over the West. The Ukrainian offensive utilized Western tanks, artillery, and ammunition. Two months after its start Sergey Shoigu, the then Russian minister of defense, pointed out that the Western weaponry was not spectacular and that in many cases even the Soviet-era weapons were better than the contemporary Western ones<sup>8</sup>. The total of Ukrainian casualties since the start of the "special military operation" in 2022 was claimed to be more than 383,000 killed and wounded by December 2023<sup>9</sup>.

#### IV. Russian vs Western Claims for Superiority in Armor

Tanks and infantry fighting vehicles have played crucial role in contemporary warfare. Tanks have been among the key symbols in the Soviet and Russian post-1991 iconography especially in films devoted to World War II. Clashes between German tanks and Soviet infantry, batteries, or tanks were artistically reconstructed in dozens of Soviet and Russian movies (*Liberation*, 1970-1971, directed by Yuri Ozerov; *Hot Snow*, 1972, directed by Gavriil Yegiazarov; and *They Fought for Their Country*, 1975, directed by Sergei Bondarchuk, from the Soviet Era; and *White Tiger*, 2012, directed by Karen Shahnazarov; and *Panfilov's 28 Men*, 2016, directed by Kim Druzhinin and Andrey Shalopa, from the post-1991 period, just to name a few). One of the scenes in *The Best in Hell*, a 2022 Russian feature movie, directed by Andrey Shcherbinin (aka Andrey Batov), with propaganda in favor of the military company Wagner, depicts how two Russian T-80 tanks and a BMP-2 infantry fighting vehicle pound the Ukrainian positions.

Western experts and media have underscored the mistakes of the Russian military in the usage of tanks during the first months of the war, especially in failed attempt to capture Kyiv in February-March 2022, when a column of

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<sup>7</sup> TASS. Shoigu Says Russian Army is most combat capable in world. TASS [online], 19.12.2023. Available from: <https://tass.com/defense/1723781>

<sup>8</sup> РИА новости. Военный ресурс Украины почти исчерпан, заявил Шойгу. РИА новости [online], 15.08.2023. Available from: <https://ria.ru/20230815/resursy-1890128905.html?in=t>

<sup>9</sup> TASS. Shoigu Says Russian Army is most combat capable in world. TASS [online], 19.12.2023. Available from: <https://tass.com/defense/1723781>

hundreds of armored vehicles did not manage to conquer Ukraine's capital. The Russian army underestimated the Ukrainian forces during the initial stage of the war and Kremlin's tanks were often ambushed because there were no infantry to move together with them and to locate ambushes. The Western media attributed many of the losses to foreign-supplied man-portable anti-tank missiles, such as US-made Javelin and British-made NLAW<sup>10</sup>. The Western experts emphasize the significant losses of the Russian armor: it is claimed that Russia had had around 2,900 tanks in service before the war and reportedly lost about 1,900 of them by February 2023<sup>11</sup>.

The experts at the Center for Strategic and International Studies estimate on the basis of open-source data that in 2023 Russia lost between 600 and 874 tanks, which is about 50 and 73 per month<sup>12</sup>. They also claim that the Russian tanks are vulnerable to anti-tank guided missiles and first-person view (FPD) drones and because of that some of the older vehicles are used mainly as mobile artillery<sup>13</sup>. Western media hold that the Russian losses are so huge that the Kremlin is forced to use even old T-62 tanks and T-55 tanks<sup>14</sup>. Moreover, Western expert and journalists have emphasized that Russia needs advanced Western components for its weapons, but sanctions prevent the supply of needed microchips, optical systems, and other components, which Russian economy cannot produce<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> BBC. Ukraine conflict: Why is Russia losing so many tanks? BBC [online], 22.04.2022. Available from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-61021388>

<sup>11</sup> SCHWARTZ, Paul. A War of Attrition: Assessing the Impact of Equipment Shortages on Russian Military Operations in Ukraine [report]. Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2023, p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> SNEGOVAYA, Maria; BERGMANN, Max; DOLBAIA, Tina; FENTON, Nick. Back in Stock? The State of Russia's Defense Industry after Two Years of the War. Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2024, p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> SNEGOVAYA, Maria; BERGMANN, Max; DOLBAIA, Tina; FENTON, Nick. Back in Stock? The State of Russia's Defense Industry after Two Years of the War. Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2024, p. 8.

<sup>14</sup> AXE, David. Russia Wasn't Supposed to Deploy its 70-Year-Old T-55 Tanks in Direct Attacks. But then Russia Got Desperate. Forbes [online], 05.02.2024. Available from: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidaxe/2024/02/05/russia-wasnt-supposed-to-deploy-its-70-year-old-t-55-tanks-in-direct-attacks-but-then-russia-got-desperate>; AXE, David. Russia is Heaping Extra Armor on More of Its 60-Year-Old T-62 Tanks. Forbes [online], 04.12.2023. Available from: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidaxe/2023/12/04/russia-is-upgrading-more-of-its-60-year-old-t-62-tanks-but-possibly-only-on-the-outside>

<sup>15</sup> BBC. Ukraine war: Russia still gets key war kit despite sanctions. BBC [online], 10.08.2023. Available from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-66452100>; Associated Press. US ambassador calls China's tech support for Russia during Ukraine invasion a 'major mistake'. The Associated Press [online], 26.06.2024. Available from: <https://apnews.com/article/us-china-russia-ukraine-war-c838f47771a86a55635ca81d693a1b8e>; BERGMANN, Max; SNEGOVAYA, Maria; DOLBAIA, Tina; FENTON, Nick. Out of Stock? Assessing the Impact of Sanctions on Russia's Defense Industry. Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2023.

Frequent Western criticism of the main Russian tank T-72 is related to its design: the rounds are placed directly beneath the turret and if they are hit and explode, all crew would perish<sup>16</sup>. This Western criticism implies not only that Russians are not sufficiently rational but also that Russia does not cherish human life, tank crews are not effectively protected and exposed to death.

Since the Western aid to Ukraine has allowed the Kremlin to portray the war as conflict between Russia and the West and to further the idea of Russia as civilization superior to the West, the Western tanks have been criticized by Russian politicians and media. In January 2023, several Western governments (“the tank coalition”) agreed to send tanks to Ukraine. NATO General-Secretary Jens Stoltenberg said that NATO and other countries that supported Ukraine had supplied about 230 tanks and more than 1,550 other armored vehicles to Kyiv<sup>17</sup>. They also trained and equipped nine new Ukrainian brigades, which is about 36,000 men. All these forces had been prepared to spearhead the Ukrainian counteroffensive that began on June 4, 2023. The supply of Western tanks to Ukraine has triggered comparisons between American, German, and British tanks pledged and given to Kyiv and Russian tanks roaming on the fields in Ukraine. Western tanks are heavier, with thicker armor and thus more protected. Russian tanks are lighter, with tinnier armor, but are reportedly more agile. If the terrain is muddy, Western tanks would be moving with difficulties<sup>18</sup>. The Russian media point at some potential weakness of German Leopard tanks: that they might be victims of the Russian helicopters or the Kornet man-portable anti-tank guided missiles<sup>19</sup>.

Although Russian T-72s used in the war against Ukraine are modernized and the newest version is T-72B3M, introduced in 2016, the Western politicians, experts and media argue that Kremlin’s tank fleet might be vulnerable to more advanced American M1 Abrams, British Challenger 2s and German Leopard 2s. The Russian armor consists also of smaller number of T-80s and T-90s, whose design is newer as compared to T-72s. Vladimir Putin praises T-90A *Proriv* as the best tank in the world<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> LENDON, Brad. Russia’s tanks in Ukraine have a ‘jack-in-the-box’ design flaw. And the West has known about it since the Gulf war. CNN [online], 28.04.2022. Available from: <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/04/27/europe/russia-tanks-blown-turrets-intl-hnk-ml/index.html>

<sup>17</sup> Associated Press. NATO: Ukraine allies sent 1,550 combat vehicles, 230 tanks. The Associated Press [online], 28.04.2023. Available from: <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-war-nato-china-8a901ab7f56b3c16ea71914c5c5e9ea6>

<sup>18</sup> TACC. Герой России заявил, что танки Abrams и Leopard вязнут в жирной почве Украины. TACC [online], 12.06.2024. Available from: <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/21075487>

<sup>19</sup> РИА новости. „Слабую точку узнали случайно“. С чем столкнутся „Леопарды“ в зоне СВО. РИА новости [online], 02.06.2023. Available from: <https://ria.ru/20230602/leopardy-1875793291.html?in=t>

<sup>20</sup> TACC. Путин назвал Т-90М „Прорыв“ лучшим танком в мире. TACC [online], 13.06.2023. Available from: <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/17997765>

However, the highest Russian expectations for military superiority in armor are related to the T-14 Armata, the newest Russian tank, first seen in 2015. It boasts non-manned turret, while the crew occupies a protective metal chamber in the hull and controls the 125 mm gun distantly. The RIA Novosti announced that Armata was used against Ukrainian forces, but only to fire at their positions, not to conduct offensive operations<sup>21</sup>. Moreover, the Russian army could have only about 40 of this new tank, which is never tested in real battles so far. The manufacturers claim that the 125 mm cannon of Armata is 17% more effective than that of Leopard 2<sup>22</sup>, but this has to be seen whether is consistent with the reality.

American M1 Abrams and British Challenger tanks clashed with Russian T-72s during the Gulf Wars in Iraq. Western tanks in the First Gulf War in 1991 fought mainly against old Soviet T-55s, designed in the 1950s, which were no match to them, and with few T-72s. T-72s in service with Iraqi army were designed in the 1970s and were older in comparison with British Challenger 1, introduced in the early 1980s and American M1 Abrams, introduced in the late 1980s. Many Iraqi T-55s and T-72s were destroyed in the war of 1991, while all Challenger 1 tanks survived the battles<sup>23</sup>. At the beginning of the First Gulf War, at least seven Abrams tanks were hit by T-72's rounds but none sustained serious damage due to their thick and reliable armor<sup>24</sup>. In one case an Iraqi T-72 hit twice the front armor of a M1A1 Abrams tank without being able to penetrate it<sup>25</sup>.

During the Second Gulf War in 2003, a column of about 120 Iraqi armored vehicles, including T-55s and T-72s, moving southwest of Basra, was destroyed by Western artillery fire, mostly from 155 mm and 105 mm guns<sup>26</sup>. Approximately 55 Abrams tanks and dozens of Bradley infantry fighting vehicles managed to destroy numerous T-55s and T-72s in the battle for Baghdad in April 2003<sup>27</sup>.

The German-made Leopard has been the first Western tank given to Ukraine and the Russian propaganda immediately has drawn parallels between German armor used by the Nazi to invade the Soviet Union in 1941 and German tanks in support of the Ukrainian regime portrayed by the Kremlin as Nazi. Since German tanks Tiger and Panther had been used in the battles against the Soviet Union, Vladimir Putin in his speech on 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the victory in Stalin-

<sup>21</sup> РИА новости. Источник: танки Т-14 „Армата“ начали применять в зоне СВО. РИА новости [online], 25.04.2023. Available from: <https://ria.ru/20230425/armata-1867480069.html>

<sup>22</sup> РИА новости. Т-14 „Армата“: тактико-технические характеристики и особенности танка. РИА новости [online], 27.02.2023. Available from: <https://ria.ru/20230227/armata-1854584669.html>

<sup>23</sup> HUTCHINS, Ray. Tanks and Other Fighting Vehicles. London: Bounty Books, 2005, p. 149.

<sup>24</sup> HUTCHINS, Ray. Tanks and Other Fighting Vehicles. London: Bounty Books, 2005, pp. 151-152.

<sup>25</sup> HUTCHINS, Ray. Tanks and Other Fighting Vehicles. London: Bounty Books, 2005, p. 152.

<sup>26</sup> HUTCHINS, Ray. Tanks and Other Fighting Vehicles. London: Bounty Books, 2005, p. 156.

<sup>27</sup> HUTCHINS, Ray. Tanks and Other Fighting Vehicles. London: Bounty Books, 2005, p. 158.



grad, February 2, 2023, pointed out that again German tanks named after wild cats and adorned with crosses would fight against Russia<sup>28</sup>.

Ukrainians allegedly had 60 Leopard 2 tanks before their counteroffensive in June 2023<sup>29</sup>. The first Kremlin's claims for destroyed Leopard tanks surfaced at the beginning of June 2023. The Head of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic Denis Pushilin argued that a damaged by Russian fire Leopard tank had later been completely destroyed by two Ukrainian tanks to avoid being captured by the Russians. The Russian Ministry of Defense published a video allegedly demonstrating destruction of Leopard tanks, which was mocked by some Western media as showing actual destruction of farm equipment<sup>30</sup>. However, the Russian Ministry of Defense later published footage that clearly showed destroyed Leopard tanks and Bradley fighting vehicles<sup>31</sup>. The Russian Minister of Defense at that time Sergey Shoigu announced that for three days of battles, June 4-6, 2023, Ukraine lost more than 3,700 personnel, 52 tanks, and 207 other armored vehicles, while Russian forces lost 281 servicemen (71 killed and 210 injured), 15 tanks, and nine infantry fighting vehicles<sup>32</sup>. Such ratios of casualties in favor of Russians (1 to 13 in personnel and 1 to 11 in armor) do not look realistic and most likely are part of the well-known propaganda game of understating own losses and overstating that of the enemy.

The Ministry of Defense of Russia announced in December 2023 that Ukrainian losses since the counteroffensive in June 2023 had been 159,000 personnel killed and wounded, 121 airplanes, 23 helicopters, 766 tanks, including 36 Leopards, and more than 2,300 armored vehicles, including 50 Bradleys<sup>33</sup>.

The U.S. infantry fighting vehicle Bradley was considered as possessing high survivability during the Operation Desert Storm. The U.S. army proudly announced in March 1991 that out of the 2,200 Bradley infantry fighting vehicles that strove against Saddam Hussein's regime, only three were destroyed<sup>34</sup>. The

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<sup>28</sup> ТАСС. Путин назвал невероятным фактом то, что РФ снова угрожают немецкими танками с крестами. ТАСС [online], 02.02.2023. Available from: <https://tass.ru/politika/16948719>

<sup>29</sup> РИА новости. Российские военные уничтожили восемь украинских танков „Леопард“. РИА новости [online], 06.06.2023. Available from: [https://ria.ru/20230606/leopard-1876342977.html?rcmd\\_alg=COL6&rcmd\\_id=1876271249](https://ria.ru/20230606/leopard-1876342977.html?rcmd_alg=COL6&rcmd_id=1876271249)

<sup>30</sup> Associated Press. Russia claims it blew up advanced Ukrainian tank, but video shows its helicopter attacked a tractor. The Associated Press [online], 09.06.2023. Available from: <https://apnews.com/article/ukraine-russia-tank-leopard-blew-up-tractor-2824d17105d3cfb875a5306acd2c9089>

<sup>31</sup> РИА новости. Минобороны показало кадры уничтоженных танков Leopard и БМП Bradley. РИА новости [online], 10.06.2023. Available from: <https://ria.ru/20230610/spetsoperatsiya-1877407397.html?in=t>

<sup>32</sup> РИА новости. Российские войска сорвали наступление ВСУ на всех участках фронта. РИА новости [online], 06.06.2023. Available from: [https://ria.ru/20230606/kontrnastuplenie-1876511020.html?rcmd\\_alg=COL6&rcmd\\_id=1876341551](https://ria.ru/20230606/kontrnastuplenie-1876511020.html?rcmd_alg=COL6&rcmd_id=1876341551)

<sup>33</sup> TASS. Shoigu Says Russian Army is most combat capable in world. TASS [online], 19.12.2023. Available from: <https://tass.com/defense/1723781>

<sup>34</sup> HUTCHINS, Ray. Tanks and Other Fighting Vehicles. London: Bounty Books, 2005, p. 157.

reported loss of 50 Bradleys for six months of battles in Ukraine apparently is intended to question the superiority of Western armor and leads to the triumphant statement of Vladimir Putin that Leopard tanks and Bradley infantry fighting vehicles “burn beautifully”<sup>35</sup>.

The Western media try to belittle the losses of Western armor, arguing that they were destroyed not in battles but mainly because of the dense minefields prepared by the Russians<sup>36</sup>. In general, the Russian minefields are pointed out by the Western media as the major obstacle for Ukraine counteroffensive: Russian minefields make Western armored vehicles vulnerable; they can be damaged by antitank mines and later destroyed by artillery fire or helicopters. As a result, instead of using armored vehicles, Ukrainians are advancing slowly on foot. But even if mines explode and damage the Western armored vehicles, Ukrainian soldiers inside sustain mostly minor injuries<sup>37</sup>.

In contrast, the Moscow’s claim of the superiority of the Russian tanks and bravery has been furthered by a video depicting a single Russian tank T-80 attacking a column of eight Ukrainian armored vehicles (two tanks T-72 and six Western-produced armored personnel carriers). The battle happened in June 2023 in Zaporizhia Region and the footage was published the next month. The members of the tank crew have been hailed as heroes and awarded by the Russian authorities. The tank crew has been credited with the destruction of all eight Ukrainian armored vehicles<sup>38</sup> although it seems that some of the Ukrainian armor was actually destroyed by artillery and other weapons.

The awarded tank crew has turned out to be multiethnic – a Russian, a Tatar, and a Yakut<sup>39</sup> – and the Russian media used this as a proof that the “Russian civilization” has achieved harmonious relations between different ethnic groups in contrast to the West, where immigrants are not integrated. One of the supposed characteristics of the “Russian civilization” underlined by the Russian politicians and media has been its ethnic, religious, and racial tolerance seen in reportedly

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<sup>35</sup> Президент России. Встреча с военными корреспондентами. Президент России [online], 13.06.2023. Available from: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/71391>

<sup>36</sup> Washington Post. The biggest obstacle to Ukraine’s counteroffensive? Minefields. Washington Post [online], 15.07.2023. Available from: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/07/15/ukraine-war-russia-mines-counteroffensive>

<sup>37</sup> Washington Post. The biggest obstacle to Ukraine’s counteroffensive? Minefields. Washington Post [online], 15.07.2023. Available from: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/07/15/ukraine-war-russia-mines-counteroffensive>

<sup>38</sup> ТАСС. Лучшие „Леопардов“ и „Абрамсов“: как совершенствовались российские танки в минувшем году. ТАСС [online], 03.01.2024. Available from: <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/19650791>; РИА новости. Наводчику танка „Алеша“ подарили в Якутии табун лошадей, машину и участок. РИА новости [online], 04.09.2023. Available from: <https://ria.ru/20230904/geroy-1894116960.html>

<sup>39</sup> ТАСС. Командир танка „Алеша“ планирует участвовать в выборах в Госсовет Татарстана. ТАСС [online], 03.04.2024. Available from: <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/20434987>

peaceful coexistence of four major religions: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism. The different ethnic and religious identity of the awarded tank crew perfectly fits into this narrative.

## **Conclusions**

1. Since the effectiveness of the Russian weaponry serves as proof of the ability of Russia to compete successfully with the West and of the reported superiority of the “Russian civilization”, Russian political and military leaders and media have emphasized the allegedly high quality of Russian weaponry. On the other hand, the Western military technology is often questioned and even ridiculed by the Russian politicians and media. The skeptic view about Western weapons is epitomized by Russian depiction of the unsuccessful Ukrainian counteroffensive in summer of 2023: highly praised German and U.S. armored vehicles are destroyed; the pace of the counteroffensive is slow, without significant results; Leopard tanks and Bradley infantry armored vehicles “burn beautifully” (Vladimir Putin).

In contrast, Western politicians and media have underlined the drawbacks of the Russian weapons and setbacks of the Russian forces, including that numerous Russian tanks and infantry fighting vehicles have been destroyed.

2. The Russian culture of military superiority has been maintained during the second year of the war in Ukraine and the beginning of the third. In 2023 and the first half of 2024, the Russian army did not experience setbacks comparable to those around Kyiv, Kharkov, and Kherson in 2022. The Ukrainian counteroffensive in summer and fall of 2023 was not successful. The Russian army managed to capture Bakhmut in May 2023 and Avdiivka in February 2024 and the Russian media underscored these successes, although both cities were not of the size and significance of Kherson, retaken by Ukraine in November 2022. The plan the Russian army to be enlarged to 1.5 m servicemen in 2023-2026 has indicated the ambition of the Kremlin Russia to reclaim its status as great world power.

3. The supply of Western weapons to Ukraine to help its defense against Russia has increased the emotional gulf between Russia and the West and diminished chances Russia to seek reconciliation with the European Union, the USA, or NATO. The West is portrayed by Russian politicians and media as aggressive and hostile, as willing to destroy Russia and using Ukrainians for this purpose. However, it should not be forgotten that Russia has invaded Ukraine, which has triggered deterioration of the relations with the West. On the other hand, the intention of the Western leaders to enlarge the NATO reaching the borders of Russia has also contributed to the decision of the Kremlin to invade Ukraine.

The Western military help to Ukraine allows the Kremlin to depict the war in Ukraine as conflict with the West, which is illustrated by the statements of the Russian media and politicians that Russia actually is fighting with NATO or the “collective West”, not just Ukraine. The idea emphasized by the Russian political leadership that the West wants to destroy Russia helps the mobilization of the Russian society: most Russians support Vladimir Putin and the activities of the Russian army in Ukraine<sup>40</sup>.

4. For Russia a potential victory in the war in Ukraine would be a proof of its return to the status of the great world power, which it enjoyed for at least three centuries, from around 1700 to 1989, reaching its peak in 1945-1989. Thus, Russian tanks, infantry fighting vehicle, and armored personnel carriers should be better than Western ones, given to Ukraine.

In contrast, the Western media and politicians question superiority of the Russian weapons in their bid to demonstrate that the contemporary Russian Federation is not effective and sufficiently developed society, which is able to compete with the West. The Western politicians and media emphasize that Russia needs crucial Western components to produce weapons but sanctions effectively block this opportunity and thus cripple Russian military efforts. The inability of Russia with its large army and to defeat Ukraine has questioned the claim for superiority of the “Russian civilization” and Russia’s ambitions to play significant role in the world.

5. Armored fighting vehicles have played crucial role not only in modern warfare but also in propaganda. Tanks are among the central components of the Soviet and post-1991 Russian iconography and thus Russian tanks should be better than Western ones given to Ukraine. The Western media have emphasized significant losses of Russian armor in the war against Ukraine partly due to Western ant-tank weapons, such as US-made man-portable anti-armor missiles Javelin. In contrast, the Russian media have underscored destroyed Western tanks and infantry fighting vehicles, especially since the Ukrainian counteroffensive in summer of 2023.

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