

DOUBLE JEOPARDY

Russia Threatens to
Invade Kupiansk Again



Introduction

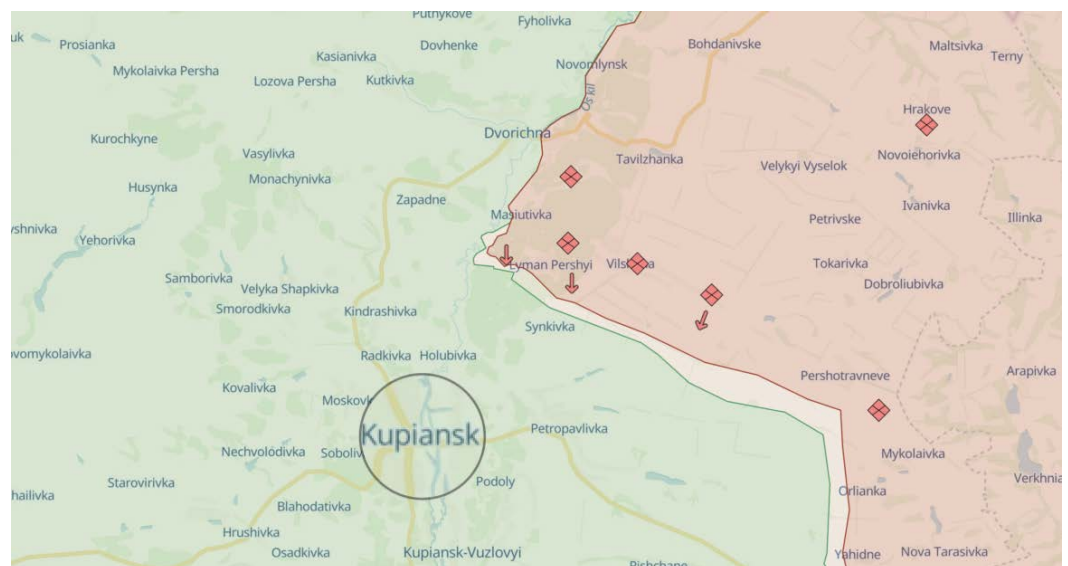
Russian forces occupied the eastern Ukrainian city of Kupiansk in February 2022, and were forced out by the Ukrainian military seven months later. The Russians are once again closing in on the city.

Russian shelling of the city and surrounding districts has intensified in recent weeks, and Russian military troops have made some territorial gains. They are reportedly being reinforced by large numbers of soldiers in anticipation of a possible reinvasion of the city.

Most civilians have left the city that once had a population of 27,000, but despite mandatory evacuation orders from the Ukrainian authorities, some 5,000 refuse to abandon their homes.

The threat of Russia retaking Kupiansk exposes a rift between Washington and Kyiv on defending the area and on Ukraine's more general conduct of the war. While some in the Pentagon urge Ukraine to focus on breaking through Russian lines in the south, Ukraine says it is determined to protect the city it retook last September.

Human Rights First visited Kupiansk city and villages near the battle front in late August 2023, and found the remaining locals defiant at the prospect of Russian reoccupation.



Human Rights First's History of Working in Kharkiv

Human Rights First has reported from the city of Kharkiv and its surrounding area since 2017, when we documented attacks on local human rights defenders who had exposed corruption in the mayor's office and reported on the situation of prisoners of war.¹

We were in the city in the first days of May 2022 when it was under almost constant bombardment, and when surrounding towns and suburbs were under Russian occupation.² Over the last year, we have regularly reported from the battered city, documenting how local activists and the wider public have resisted Russian aggression.³

In May 2023 Human Rights First released a report on how the village of Tsyркuny, north of Kharkiv, survived Russian occupation, and another in June 2023 on the Russian occupation of the city of Izyum and surrounding villages, also in the Kharkiv Oblast.⁴

In July 2023 we released a report with local NGO the Kharkiv Anti-Corruption Center on dubious contracts awarded by Kharkiv's authorities for the reconstruction of public buildings.⁵

For this report on Kupiansk, Human Rights First worked with local media outlet Gwara media.

Kupiansk Under Occupation

Three days after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the mayor of Kupiansk, Hennadiy Matsehora, made the controversial decision to surrender the city to Russian forces. It was the first city to unconditionally surrender; Matsehora was indicted for treason by the Ukrainian government.

Kupiansk, with a pre-war population of around 27,000, was under Russian occupation for almost 200 days. Kupiansk's position, close to the Russian border, made it an early target for the Russian army. Its railway assets are also part of its attraction for Russia's military. When the Russians took Kupiansk, the city became a hub for supplying Russian forces on the front lines, functioning as a crossroads for rail and road transports to fuel the Russian military.

¹ <https://humanrightsfirst.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Democracy-in-Danger.pdf>

² <https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/underground-in-a-ukrainian-city-at-war-how-kharkivs-metro-system-offers-shelter/>

³ <https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/as-winter-bites-russian-missiles-threaten-ukraines-power-supply/>; <https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/coping-in-the-kharkiv-cold/>; <https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/ukraines-media-gwara-fights-for-truth-in-kharkiv/>; <https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/how-lgbt-groups-in-kharkiv-help-the-city-fight-back/>; <https://gwaramedia.com/en/foreigners-in-kharkiv-brian-dooley-when-i-am-asked-about-some-hopeful-signs-for-ukraine-kharkiv-is-always-one-of-them/>

⁴ <https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/how-the-ukrainian-village-of-tsyркuny-survived-russian-occupation/>;

<https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/bombed-out-and-occupied-russias-invasion-of-izyum/>

⁵ <https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/high-stakes-for-human-rights-as-kharkiv-battles-corruption/>



Locals tell of torture chambers and mass graves during Russian occupation. They also report an accelerated Russification program, with Russian textbooks shipped into schools and Russian political parties opening offices in the city. Kupiansk became the de facto headquarters for Moscow's regional military administration.

One local woman told Human Rights First that she was shocked that soon after the February invasion many of her neighbors and colleagues turned out to be collaborators.

Kupiansk was recaptured by Ukrainian forces in mid-September 2022, part of a major counteroffensive across the region, but the threat of reinvasion never disappeared. The city's current population is estimated at only around 5,000.

Renewed Attacks

In recent months, Russian shelling of the city and the surrounding area has intensified. In March 2023, local authorities ordered that families with children and people "with limited mobility" must leave due to "constant" shelling by Russian forces.

On August 10, 2023, Kyiv issued a mandatory evacuation order for all civilians from 37 northeast settlements, including Kupiansk, because attacks kill as many as ten civilians a week.

In early August, Russian missiles destroyed a blood transfusion center in the city, in what Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky called a "war crime."

Human Rights First met some of those refusing to comply with the evacuation order. Local authorities estimate that of the 5,000 people remaining in the city, around 2,000 residents have no intention of leaving their homes.⁶

When Human Rights First visited the city the sounds of incoming and outgoing fire were almost constant. Grey plumes of smoke rose from neighborhoods hit by missiles. A tearful woman told us she is the stepmother of a young woman who was one of two civilians killed on Saturday, August 26 in a cafe near a small market.

Kupiansk Provokes Tension Between Washington and Kyiv

As fears of a Russian reinvasion of Kupiansk escalate, there is an increasingly public rift between the Pentagon and Ukraine's military on how resources should be dedicated.

⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-64833750>; <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-war-residents-evacuate-d4c6d7e8f68906ed7c3abd7d9caa131a>; <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/08/22/ukraine-evacuates-russia-retake-kupiansk/>; <https://amp.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/05/zelenskiy-condemns-attack-on-blood-transfusion-centre-as-war>; <https://abcnews.go.com/amp/International/wireStory/evacuation-order-finds-followers-northeast-ukraine-despite-russias-102611719>



American and other Western officials say Ukraine has deployed too many of its best troops in the wrong places, advocating for a concentrated push through Russian enemy lines towards the south.⁷

Ukraine's authorities say Russia is amassing troops near Kupiansk, estimating there are 45,000 soldiers threatening the district. Ukrainian soldiers in Kupiansk say that in recent days Russian forces have mounted several assaults to probe for weaknesses in the city's defenses. British military intelligence also assesses that Russia is intensifying its effort in the Kupiansk area, with the "realistic possibility" of renewed attacks.⁸

Ukrainian General Oleksandr Syrsky has called for more reinforcements to defend Kupiansk, ignoring Pentagon advice to focus his military efforts on attacking Russian positions near Mariupol and elsewhere in the south of the country.⁹

But being seen to abandon a strong defense around Kupiansk is politically untenable for Kyiv's government. On Friday, August 25, General Syrsky posted on Telegram, "Enemy units continue to inflict damage with artillery, mortars and aircraft" and "Under such conditions, we must promptly take all measures to strengthen our defenses on the threatened lines and advance where possible."¹⁰

In response to American criticism of the seemingly slow progress of Ukraine's counteroffensive, President Zelensky said that shifting Ukrainian forces away from places like Kupiansk is exactly what Russia is trying to accomplish. During a news conference on August 23, he bridled, "We will not give up Kharkiv, Donbas, Pavlohrad or Dnipro. And that's that." He added, "And let all the analysts in the world not even count on it."¹¹

On August 27, retired American four-star General Jack Keane criticized U.S. military personnel for voicing frustration at how Ukraine is conducting its counteroffensive, saying "American officers appear to have unrealistic expectations of what a single counteroffensive operation can achieve. The U.S. should be focused on helping Ukraine fight the war the way it wants to fight, not chirping from the sidelines."¹²

Both Ukrainian and Russian forces are defending positions that stretch for hundreds of miles, and so far, this year neither side has been able to make a significant breakthrough. And for all of the technologically advanced weapons being used, much of this war is

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/22/us/politics/ukraine-counteroffensive-russia-war.html>

⁸ <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2023/08/27/7417264/>; https://twitter.com/defencehq/status/1695313215691833802?s=46&t=-SUmKV_ecYFSSIFRSN4iPA

⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/26/world/europe/russia-ukraine-war-counteroffensive.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/26/world/europe/russia-ukraine-war-counteroffensive.html>

¹¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/26/world/europe/russia-ukraine-war-counteroffensive.html>;

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/26/world/europe/russia-ukraine-war-counteroffensive.html>;

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/investigations/ukraine-war-counteroffensive-russia-success-failure-rcna98054>

¹² <https://www.wsj.com/articles/let-ukraine-direct-its-own-counteroffensive-russia-war-weapons-military-kyiv-bd360796>



defensive trench warfare that is shaped by the weather, as Human Rights First reported in November 2022.¹³

Rains will start again in a month or two, bogging down any progress made by either side. The fighting won't stop, but it will become muddier, messier, and slower.

Locals say if Kupiansk were to again fall to Russian forces, it would be a devastating, demoralizing blow. It would lead Ukrainians to question whether Kyiv can protect the areas it took back late last year and undermine confidence in Ukraine's military leadership.

Locals Refuse to Panic

Meanwhile, locals are refusing to panic. Life is far from normal, but the city's heart is still beating. Kupiansk and its nearby villages bear the usual hallmarks of having been under intense fire and occupation.

Many homes and public buildings were destroyed by missiles, tanks tore up roads, and cemeteries are overgrown as locals could not safely tend them. Nearly all gas stations are bombed out, gun cartridge shells are strewn across the streets, and blown-up tanks litter the highways.



Detail of Kupiansk City Hall
after Russian shelling.

¹³ <https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/as-winter-bites-russian-missiles-threaten-ukraines-power-supply/>



Surrounding districts, and much of the city itself, are eerily deserted. Nearby communities such as Kisharivska are largely abandoned, and groups of Ukrainian soldiers hunker in the acres of sunflowers and pine forests blanketing the countryside.

Driving fast through the empty tree-lined city streets is advisable: the barrage of artillery sounds is a constant reminder of the danger. Things are otherwise mostly silent, even calm.

Just south of Kupiansk, more than a dozen women volunteers are busy making camouflage webbing. Some have bicycled from surrounding villages to do their bit for the war effort.



One of the volunteers makes camouflage.



Some of the women cut green and brown material into three-inch strips, then pass them to others sitting at wooden frames. These women intricately thread the strips through small mesh to make camouflage cloaks. It takes two or three days to make one of these surprisingly light and comfortable cloaks.

Other women stand at larger frames threading bigger pieces of material into larger, blanket-sized products that will cover machinery and hideouts. In an adjoining room more women are making lighter-colored camouflage, while others sort through boxes of donated clothes. There's not much chitchat; the women seem focused and motivated as they quickly finish pieces.

Like many people Human Rights First has spoken to in Ukraine in recent years, their patriotism should not be mistaken for unconditional support for the authorities. "Make sure you write about corruption by the officials here," one says. "And ask why they can't provide proper places for our soldiers to wash and shower, and why they're not stopping people selling alcohol when that's banned."

Hanna Lukyanivna stayed in her home in Kupiansk city throughout the occupation. She said that while some people she knew collaborated with the Russians, she refused their humanitarian help. She held out as long as she could even in times when it was so hard to feed herself and her dog that she had to beg neighbors for food. "Finally we heard that a Ukrainian official has said that for people living under occupation it was okay to take humanitarian help from the Russians, so then I took it," she said.



Hanna Lukyanivna in her kitchen.



Lukyanivna has a son and grandson in the military, and she says that when the Russians were driven out, she opened her home for Ukrainian soldiers to relax and rest there. "So far the missiles have missed my house," she says, crossing herself in blessing.

Most of the windows have been blown out of the hospital in the city center, but nearby a dozen women work in a windowless basement office to prepare for the new school year. It's a repurposed coffee shop, and these education officials work with quiet resolution as though oblivious to the dangers a few miles away.

They show no sense of panic or even fear despite the bombardments and the Russian army threatening the gates of the city. "We have 1,680 kids to prepare for the new year, and we're figuring how to cope with a shortage of teachers," shrugs Olena Iliushina. "Yes, we're planning for kids to return to their education. We have to replace some of the books that the Russians brought, and we have problems in finding math teachers, but we're getting on with it."



Olena Iliushina prepares
for the new school year.

Russians might be on the verge of a full-scale invasion of Kupiansk, and most locals have left. The streets are eerily serene, except for the thunder of artillery shelling and the frenetic energy of an occasional tank or other military vehicle careering past.

But civilians who stay are defying the impulse to panic. A woman whose relative was killed in a missile strike was back to selling fruit on the street two days later. Parents push kids on swings in public playgrounds, teenagers hang out smoking and eating ice cream.



Hannah Lukyanivna stands on her porch and looks around her garden. She says she's going nowhere. "They say the Russians might invade again. But I'm not leaving. This is a Ukrainian home on Ukrainian ground. Why should I leave?"



Mission Statement

Human Rights First works to create a just world in which every person's intrinsic human rights are respected and protected, to build societies that value and invest in all their people. To reach that goal demands assisting victims of injustice, bringing perpetrators of abuse to justice, and building institutions that ensure universal rights.

Human Rights First is a nonprofit, nonpartisan international human rights organization based in Los Angeles, New York, and Washington D.C.

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Cover photo: A Russian tank destroyed in Kupiansk.

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