

EXCLUSIVE

**By Lord Ashcroft
in Lyman, eastern Ukraine**

All out war in the ‘city with no windows’

Days after being sanctioned by Vladimir Putin’s cronies, having met Ukraine’s new army leadership and toured its secret drone factories, Lord Ashcroft files an exclusive dispatch for the Daily Express from the embattled country

IT IS known affectionately by Ukrainian soldiers as “the city with no windows”. As I apprehensively entered the deserted streets of Lyman under military escort, it was easy to see why. With the explosions from incoming Russian artillery fire worryingly close, there was barely a building that had not been destroyed or badly damaged – and not an unbroken window in sight.

More than two years into this brutal all-out war, Lyman is probably the most damaged city of those which remain under Ukrainian control, having been first seized by the invading Russians in the spring of 2022 and later recaptured. Yet the chilling news for the small number of locals who remain in this eastern Ukrainian city is that senior military sources have told me Russia now considers Lyman, and its neighbouring cities of Slovyansk and Kramatorsk, as its “number one target” as it seeks to expand its occupied territory in the Donetsk Oblast province.

As if the residents of Lyman did not have enough problems already with regular missile and artillery attacks, three inches of snow on the ground, night-time temperatures as low as -15C and no running water or central heating. This city is the very definition of human misery but also human resilience.

At one of two small city supermarkets in the centre of Lyman, I talked to locals who had braved the nearby fighting to buy food from well-stocked shelves. One of them, Victoria Melnik, 43, said she had remained in the city where she was born throughout all the fighting of the past two years.

“It has been very sad to see the city I love destroyed. It’s hard to accept. I thought about leaving but my son, who is 23, wanted to stay and I would not leave without him.”

Endurance

Another woman approached with something that is rare in the city – a small child. Yana Miroshnichenko, her husband Olexandr, and their daughter, Valeria, all left after the worst of the fighting in the spring of 2022 but returned after Ukraine’s army ended five months of Russian occupation later that year. Yana said they returned home because her husband has a job as a railway worker, but there is no school so her six-year-old daughter is educated online.

“Our apartment is comfortable but it has no windows – yet having no windows is normal in this city after all the bombing.

My daughter is scared by all the explosions but we will stay for now as this is our home,” she shrugged. In Ukraine, Lyman is regarded as a city although in Britain it would be described as a large town.

Pre-invasion, it had a population of a little over 25,000 – now it is down to some 5,000 residents, many elderly, disabled, poor or simply too stubborn to leave. For most of them, each day is simply about survival.

A 10-mile section of the frontline near Lyman is defended by Ukraine’s 21st Brigade. There have been battles every day since heavy fighting began on November 27. In some places, the two armies are little more than a mile apart. A senior Army source said: “Our brave soldiers are tired but we will stay and fight. This is a war of endurance.”

Four hundred miles west in the capital Kyiv, during my sixth visit to the war-torn country, just days after I was sanctioned by Russia because of the support that I have given to Ukraine, I was given an insight into the country’s war effort and urgent problems it faces along its 620-mile frontline.

The country’s new Chief of the General Staff delivered an impassioned plea for more Western help to thwart Russian aggression and new tactics on the battlefield.

Major-General Anatoliy Barhylevych, the newly appointed second-in-command of Ukraine’s Armed Forces, said his country’s

desperate shortage of weapons and ammunition is costing “hundreds of lives” on the frontline. “These are lives that can never be replaced,” he told me. Vowing to win back Russian-held territory, the Maj-Gen said: “We will fight to the very end. We will never give up but we need a shoulder next to us to lean on.”

With nearly two years’ experience fighting on the frontline, he fears the West is seriously under-estimating Russian ambitions to seize territory far beyond Ukraine.

“Make no mistake, if we had not stopped Russia two years ago, the war would now be fought by the EU and NATO,” he said.

Maj-Gen Barhylevych, speaking to me at a secret location in Kyiv, is number two only to General Oleksandr Syrskyi, appointed earlier this month by President Zelensky.

The military shake-up was controversial and came as the president decided there was a need for change and new tactics on the battlefield.

Political sources say the new military team has a reputation for professionalism, integrity and promotion on merit. Maj-Gen Barhylevych delivered a sincere thanks to Britain, the

US and other Western countries for their help so far but said more military aid was desperately needed.

“We value and respect the help we have received but we desperately need more and more special ammunition to be able to fight on. We realise it is costly but this war is ongoing and our help must be ongoing too.”

On Saturday, the war’s second anniversary, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak urged Western leaders to be “bolder” in sending billions of pounds in interest on frozen Russian assets to Ukraine. It follows his pledge in January that the UK would provide £2.5 billion in military aid to Ukraine over the coming year – an increase of £200 million on the previous two years.

There are major frustrations that political in-fighting in the United States is blocking the next round of military aid worth £47 billion.

Ukraine’s recent setbacks, including pulling out of Avdiivka – the so-called “gateway to the Donetsk Oblast province” – result from having to confront a better-armed

and larger opponent. The Russian army, according to Maj-Gen Barhylevych, is also more barbaric in its approach to war and treatment of its own forces. “The West needs to understand that Russia does not have a Western-style army. The Russian army today is like the Mongols of the past. They are prepared to attack with very limited artillery.”

He implied Russian commanders had no concerns for the lives of their own men, willingly sending them forward in near-suicidal attacks. The Russians were currently experimenting with a host of tactics on the battlefield, including the use of highly-sophisticated drones in the most hi-tech war ever fought. He said drones were a valuable addition to artillery, but could never replace it.

Perhaps the most significant change in recent tactics, however, is the expanded use of sophisticated “flying bombs”. These are typically air-dropped weapons carrying a large explosive.

“This is a game-changer,” Maj-Gen Barhylevych told me, shaking his head to imply the huge destructive force of bombs weighing up to 500kg. “There is currently almost no way to stop these bombs once they have been launched.”

This means Ukraine desperately needs the West to provide improved air-defence systems along with long-range missiles capable of knocking out the aircraft that launch the flying bombs, and eventually taking out enemy airfields in the so-called “Occupied Territories” – land held by Russia



RUINS: Lord Ashcroft in devastated Lyman. Yana and Valeria, inset, returned to the city

since 2014 and, again, since February 2022. There is no doubt Russia holds the overwhelming balance in air power and at sea. However, Ukraine has enjoyed significant success attacking its Black Sea Fleet. Before February 2022, the fleet contained 70 ships of which some 25 have now been destroyed or disabled, say Ukrainian military sources. Sea drones have been a valuable weapon used to target Russian warships.

Ukraine’s new Chief of the General Staff finished our interview on an upbeat note, pledging that his forces would be launching major assaults of their own.

“We want to liberate our territories that have been illegally seized by the Russians,” he said. “We will be changing our tactics too. We are working on new tactics that will soon give the Russians a huge surprise.”

Earlier in my week-long visit, at a secret location in western Ukraine, I was given access to a factory where cutting-edge drones are designed, trialled and manufactured for use on the frontline. The unit, where 120 employees work around the clock, belongs to a private company which specialises in ground drones for use on the battlefield.

Most drones, of course, fly in the air but as the war has pro-

gressed both ground drones and sea drones – to attack Russian ships – are key assets.

The ground drones, typically battery-operated, four-wheel drive and with two cameras, are used for surveillance and attack but their key role is to evacuate wounded soldiers.

Without them, typically six men would be needed to evacuate a battlefield casualty and this is when the personnel are at their most vulnerable to Russian “kamikaze drones”.

A senior source at the company, which I cannot name for security reasons, told me: “These ground drones are saving lives every day on the battlefield. By saving lives, they can help our soldiers win this war.” They can

be operated remotely and from relative safety from up to 1.8 miles away and can travel up to 15 miles on a single battery, depending on weather conditions and the terrain.

Each costs up to £95,000: this top price is for the largest model, resembling a “mini truck”, and it is equipped with both a machine-gun holder and a holder for a grenade launcher. The largest ground drones have the biggest firepower but they are easier to spot – and target – from the air. The firm’s customers are primarily the Ukrainian Government, city authorities and private individuals, all involved in the war effort.

My visit gave me a fascinating insight into hi-tech modern warfare and sources at the factory said there are plans for the Ukrainian Army to have an entirely “robotic battalion” soon. Travelling through this vast war-torn country also took me to Kharkiv, Ukraine’s second largest city and situated just 25 miles from the Russian border. One afternoon, I travelled an hour’s drive from the centre of the city to visit a secret base belonging to the Kraken Regiment, a formidable force made up principally of volunteer soldiers. Despite the efforts of the Ukrainian

Centre for Security and Co-operation to support them, the Kraken Regiment is short of arms, ammunition and military vehicles. The centre I visited is considered a “hospital” for 39 vehicles which are being repaired so that they can be returned to the frontline.

“Benya”, the call sign of the man who commands the unit, said despite recent setbacks morale remained high. “We are volunteers, the most patriotic of the patriotic,” he said. Benya, 37, originally from Kyiv and married with five children, added: “The situation is difficult but we are planning a ‘reply’ to Russians that you will hear about soon.”

He added: “We are currently seeing a 10-year chapter in a 300-year-old story. As long as Russia exists, we are in danger of being attacked. Aggression towards a neighbour is part of Russia’s make-up.”

Before leaving Kharkiv, I visited part of a giant cemetery – known as the “Alley of Glory” – where hundreds of soldiers have been buried over the past two years.

Head bowed and standing beside a sea of blue and yellow national flags, I paid my respects to those who have given their lives to defend a proud nation that is fighting for its survival against overwhelming odds.

● Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is an international businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. For more information on his work, visit lordashcroft.com. Follow him on X/Facebook @LordAshcroft



FRONTLINE: Lord Ashcroft and Major-General Barhylevych



HI-TECH WARFARE: Ground drones could turn tide of the battle