He's the former Commander-in-Chief behind Ukraine's finest victories, yet was he too cavalier with the lives of his men? Here, in an exclusive interview with LORD ASHCROFT, General Oleksandr Syrskyi hits back at his critics

They say I sent too many brave Ukrainians to their deaths... but I had to do everything to stop the brutal Russian onslaught



EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW



By **LORD ASHCROFT**

FEW military commanders have divided public opinion as much as General Oleksandr Syrskyi. To his supporters in Ukraine, he is a soldiers' soldier, more at home in the frontline trenches than in the corridors of political power and never asking his men to do what he would not do himself.

To his detractors, he is an old-style Soviet commander, ill-equipped to fight a modern high-tech war. He was dubbed the 'Butcher of Bakhmut' by critics who claimed – he would say unfairly – that he was too casual with the lives of his men in the face of Russian onslaughts on the embattled city in east Ukraine.

What is not in dispute, however, is that General Syrskyi masterminded and pulled off one of the most daring military coups of modern times within

> *'To me it was clear that the Russians would invade'*

months of being appointed as the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine in early 2024. This came when his forces successfully invaded the region of Kursk, thereby enabling Ukrainians to be the first enemy soldiers on Russian soil for 80 years.

On August 6 2024, Ukrainian forces launched a major incursion across the border. By the end of the first week, they had seized nearly 400 square miles of Russian territory and at least 28 towns and villages. Later, a further 100 square miles were captured as the advance continued.

The offensive hugely boosted the morale of the Ukrainian armed forces and its civilians at a crucial stage in the war, while President Vladimir Putin was humiliated. It took the best part of a year for the Russians to reclaim all of their territory in Kursk but thousands of Ukrainian soldiers lost their lives in the incursion and in the difficult retreat.

General Syrskyi had planned the attack for months and struck as the Russians were preparing frontline assaults to pursue their 'special military operation'.

'The Kursk offensive achieved all of the objectives that were set. We wanted to disrupt Russian plans to seize our territories and we chose to attack Kursk because that was where the density of the Russian defences was at its weakest,' the General told me in a matter-of-fact way. However, it was two other military operations during the all-out war which began in 2022 which the General considers to be his finest military achievements. The first was the defence of Kyiv in the opening days of the war after the Russian forces attacked in the early hours of February 24, 2022.

'At the beginning of 2022, the situation was complicated,' the General told me, with Russian forces building up on its border with Ukraine and on Ukraine's border with Belarus too. 'The Russians were conducting training exercises and then we received warnings [of Russian aggression] from our partners, from the United States and the United Kingdom.

'Many people did not want to believe that war would arrive but to me it was clear the Russians would invade when they extended the original period of the training exercises.' As commander of the Ukrainian ground forces, General Syrskyi sought and received permission from his then overall commander, General Valerii Zaluzhnyi, to plan the defence of the capital. If Kyiv had been seized by the invaders, Ukraine would almost certainly have fallen into Russian hands and been erased from the map of Europe.

Within days, Syrskyi set about training and mobilising thousands of men, and he set up inner and outer defences to protect Kyiv. On February 23, he called an emergency meeting of the leaders of the city's armed forces, training centres, national guard, national police, local mayors and others to organise the defence of the city.

That meeting was well-timed because the next morning, February 24, the full-scale invasion began with Russian Special Forces, paratroopers and other forces eventually reaching the outskirts of Kyiv but then being repelled by the courage and skill of Ukrainian defenders.



HERO OF UKRAINE: General Oleksandr Syrskyi poring over a map with President Zelensky in Kharkiv as they stem the Russians' advance

Syrskyi's brave, brilliant defence of Kyiv did not go unnoticed: in April 2022, just two months into the all-out war, he was honoured by President Volodymyr Zelensky with the country's most prestigious decoration: Hero of Ukraine.

Syrskyi considers his other most significant military achievement was the successful counter-offensive against Kharkiv in September and October 2022 when, in a series of astute tactical manoeuvres, he regained huge swathes of land – some 450 square miles – previously captured by Russia.

'In both the defence of Kyiv and the Kharkiv counter-offensive, we were heavily outnumbered,' the General said, barely able to hide his pride in what his men achieved against a larger and better-equipped enemy.

It was a similar story throughout the entire 29 months – from February 2024 to July 2026 – that he commanded the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Not only did the enemy have vastly superior numerical manpower but it was far better equipped with a much larger air force and navy, and with much bigger firepower at its disposal, including huge supplies of cruise and ballistic missiles.

I had a first-hand experience of the difficulties faced by Ukrainian soldiers on the frontline when I visited the city of Lyman in the bitter cold in February 2024, the month of General Syrskyi's new appointment. Soldiers in the city complained they could only fire a single artillery shell in response to ten by Russia because ammunition was in such short supply.

Oleksandr Stanislavovych Syrskyi was born into a military family in the rural village of Novinki, near Moscow, on July 26, 1965.

At that time, Russia – like Ukraine – was part of the Soviet Union under the autocratic rule of Leonid Brezhnev.

It was as a teenager, and encouraged by his father, that Syrskyi became set on a career in the Army. At the time, his family was living in Kharkiv, Ukraine's second city and which the General describes affectionately as 'my dear [home] city'.

After joining the old Soviet army, he studied at the Moscow Higher Military Command School, the leading military training school in the Soviet Union at the time, but, over the following years and decades, it was Ukraine that he considered his home.

When the Soviet Union broke up in 1991, Syrskyi had no hesitation in continuing his career in the Ukrainian, rather than the Russian, Armed Forces. 'I have these important values that I stick to,' the General said. 'So it was easy for me. I took a military oath [to defend Ukraine]. I have never had Russian citizenship, so that was the natural choice for me.'

Syrskyi, who is twice married with two sons, has been involved in the defence of Ukraine for well over 12 years, ever since Russia illegally annexed Crimea and other parts of eastern Ukraine in 2014. However, he had begun to suspect Russia might be planning to invade its neighbour as early as 2010 and 2011, when Russian attitudes in the military and among civilians became more hostile towards Ukraine.

Syrksyi is warm, charming, with a good sense of humour and is a formidable presence in any room. Broad shouldered and muscular, he likes, even at 61, to run six miles a day and keep fit in a gym.

His strengths as a commander result from him being intelligent

> *'In the defence of Kyiv, we were heavily outnumbered'*

and strategic. An excellent mathematician and a keen chess player, he loves military history and has studied battlefield tactics spanning from the Romans to well beyond the Second World War.

I interviewed the General at a secret location in central London. Dressed in a sharp navy suit, pale blue shirt and dark blue patterned tied, he came across as cheerful and relaxed, despite being replaced as head of the Armed Forces of Ukraine in a messy military reshuffle four months ago.

Syrskyi has faced criticism from opponents for allegedly sacrificing too many lives in the ultimately unsuccessful defence of the city of Bakhmut from July 2022 to April 2023, a period that predated his appointment as overall commander of his country's Armed Forces. Defending his actions, the General said it had been vital to halt the advance of Russian forces who, once they had taken Bakhmut, would have tried to take Kramatorsk and other key cities.

Syrskyi said: 'We focused on fortifying the area in order to hold [back] the enemy. The Bakhmut defence was of great importance for us, to hold back the Russian military advances deep into the Ukrainian defence fortifications.'

He also had to neutralise the formidable threat posed by the mercenary Wagner Group headed then by Yevgeny Prigozhin, which was Russia's best fighting unit at the time. In fact, Wagner's losses exceeded Ukrainian casualties in the battle by a factor of 7.5.

'In Bakhmut, Wagner [Group] was destroyed', he says.

Sources close to the General say to blame him for heavy losses at Bakhmut is unfair and inaccurate as Ukrainian casualty numbers were, in fact, surprisingly low defending the city.

Syrskyi also countered criticisms that he was slow to adapt to modern warfare, including mass use of drones. 'The strategies, technologies and tactics of war are constantly changing and everyone, from soldiers to generals, is constantly learning,' he said.

Indeed, on my 16 visits to Ukraine since the start of the all-out war, I have witnessed that in many areas, including the invention of sea drones, Ukraine is now the world leader.

Intriguingly, the General told me he sees AI playing a key role in future. 'The rapid and large-scale integration of AI maximises the operational effectiveness of troops and facilitates the work of commanders at all levels,' he said.

'It also enhances the effectiveness of complex systems for the integrated management and co-ordination of drones, electronic warfare, air defence and radar. This can offset the enemy's superiority in personnel and firepower.'

Syrskyi has never publicly criticised President Zelensky for sacking him but, say friends, his dismissal dented his pride, especially given his decades-long commitment to his adopted homeland. As one of the General's friends put it: 'The USSR gave him his education and training but Ukraine gave him his calling.'

Our interview took place as Presidents Trump, Putin and Xi were meeting in China, where the Russian leader is again believed to have demanded the whole of the Donbas in eastern Ukraine as one of his key demands for peace. This would include land that currently remains in Ukrainian hands.

> *'In my soul, I am and I always will be a soldier'*

'Having lost a lot of our best sons and daughters defending Ukraine [including the Donbas], I consider such a demand to be unacceptable,' said Syrskyi sternly. If there is to be a ceasefire, as a pre-cursor to a long-term peace deal, he believes it must be along the line of the current frontline, without conceding any further territory to the enemy. Russia currently holds some 20 per cent of Ukraine land.

Syrskyi's predecessor as Commander-in-Chief was General Valerii Zaluzhnyi, who did little before or after his dismissal to hide his political ambitions.

After being relieved of his military role, Zaluzhnyi was made Ukraine's ambassador to the UK. Most Ukrainians are convinced Zelensky used the move to keep a potential political rival out of Ukraine. As and when this brutal war ends and elections are restored, Zaluzhnyi is expected to be a presidential candidate.

I ended our interview by asking Syrskyi how he hoped to be remembered as a military leader. Slightly uneasy, he initially indicated it was for history to judge him objectively before adding, quietly: 'We [I] did our best and utmost to defend Ukraine.'

Unlike his predecessor, however, this four-star general appears to harbour no political ambitions. For General Syrskyi sounded convincing when he told me: 'In my soul, I am and I always will be a soldier.'

● *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.*