With the demise of the Warsaw Pact military alliance, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the gradual gravitation of many former Soviet bloc countries to NATO, it appeared that the hopes and dreams of a more pacific world were on the verge of achievement. These dreams were shattered with the resurgence of an increasingly hostile Russia. This could be seen in the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, and became even more apparent when Crimea was annexed from Ukraine in March 2014 and hostilities broke out in Donbass in eastern Ukraine shortly afterwards.

Canada was one of the earliest to condemn Russia’s expansionism and remains one of Ukraine’s strongest international supporters in its efforts to establish a stable and secure environment and implement democratic and economic reforms. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the achievement of independence, Ukraine has had a series of political convulsions. The country is torn between those who favour increased ties with the West (including NATO and the European Union), and those who want to maintain historic ties with Russia. This can be seen in the continuing conflict along the eastern part of the country – which reflects differences in perspective for the future of Ukraine that have taken a violent turn. In response to continuing conflict in the east of the country, and accusations of Russian military aggression and illegal occupation in support of Ukrainians who favour closer ties with Russia, Canada has taken an active role to support the Ukrainian people, government and military as they try to resolve their internal challenges and differences with Russia.

In addition to supporting Ukraine with its aspirations to move closer to the West, NATO has increased its activities in the Baltic states and in its Eastern European member countries to address growing Russian military adventurism. Canada has deployed army, air force and
navy assets and personnel to the region. It deployed six CF-18 fighter aircraft and ground support personnel to a NATO air-policing mission in Poland. As well, Canada has assigned Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) ships to the Black Sea in support of NATO missions, starting with HMCS Fredericton, then HMCS Toronto in 2014. HMCS Winnipeg also spent time in the Black Sea in 2015, and HMCS Fredericton took over as part of Standing NATO Maritime Group 2 (SNMG2) Task Unit 02 deployed to the Black Sea in April 2016, to conduct operations in concert with Romanian, Bulgarian and Turkish ships as part of Operation Reassurance.

Canada also launched a military training mission under the rubric Operation Unifier, in coordination with the United States and the United Kingdom, to enhance Ukraine’s military capacity to deal with threats to its sovereignty. The focus of this article is Operation Unifier, the military training mission. The article is for the most part based on an 8 June 2016 telephone interview with Lieutenant-Colonel Jason Guiney, commanding officer of the first battalion, The Royal Canadian Regiment – and commander of Rotation 0 of Joint Task Force-Ukraine (JTF-U). Lieutenant-Colonel Guiney is a veteran of operations in Ethiopia and Eritrea (2001), Haiti (2004) with the United Nations, Pakistan Disaster Assistance Relief Team after the 2005 earthquake in northern Pakistan, and operations in Afghanistan 2008-09.

The current mandate of Operation Unifier is two years, set to expire on 31 March 2017. Of the states participating in this program, Canada was among the earliest contributors and has one of the longer term mandates. Operation Unifier began with the deployment of 185 Canadian soldiers by CC-177 Globemaster aircraft arriving at Lviv International Airport, Ukraine, in two groups, on 25 and 31 August 2015. Coming from various units of the Canadian Armed Forces, the task force included navy clearance divers from Esquimalt and infantrymen from Petawawa but the bulk of the personnel came from Second Mechanized Brigade Group in Petawawa. At first sight, one might ask why navy clearance divers were included in a land force training operation. However, among the many skills of a navy clearance diver is explosive ordnance disposal, better known by its more popular name of bomb disposal.

This group comprised Rotation 0 (ROTO 0) of Canada’s military training mission in Ukraine. During the two-year mandate, the Canadians are there to teach essential military skills to soldiers of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. “What we’re doing is critical,” Lieutenant-Colonel Guiney told me. “Certainly from my experience as commander, what I saw was a country and armed forces very much in need. The Ukrainian military is undergoing an interesting period. There was significant political turmoil in the country of which Russia took advantage. [It] seized Crimea,
and then became engaged in a home-grown insurgency in the Donbass region. So the whole of Ukraine was under a cloud of uncertainty and upheaval, their armed forces had been neglected for a long time, so this war was thrust upon them at the worst possible time, making the skillsets we were delivering to them much needed."

Canada’s mission is to build capacity and train the Ukrainian armed forces, along four pillars, or lines of effort: development, security, democracy and humanitarian aid. This is based on formal requests from the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence. All parties work through the Multinational Joint Commission, formed in July 2014 and chaired by Ukraine and the United States, with participation of Canada, the United Kingdom and several other states. The joint commission is the overarching body to determine in which areas Ukraine should modernize its armed forces, as well as part of Ukraine’s Defence Education Enhancement Program (DEEP).

Soon after the arrival of ROTO 1 in January 2016, three additional lines of effort were added – flight safety training, logistics modernization, and a group of trainers from the Military Training and Cooperation Program conducting seminars in public affairs and operational planning courses. ROTO 1 is composed of troops from the 2nd Canadian Division Québec.

**Canada’s Training Mission in Ukraine**

The largest component of the effort is an infantry training company, comprising approximately 150 troops. The Canadian task force’s principal focus is tactical training at the Ukrainian Armed Forces International Peacekeeping and Security Centre in Yavoriv, roughly 30 kilometres from the Ukraine-Poland border. The task force provides additional specialized training to Ukrainian troops elsewhere in the host state and in Canada. Some medical trainers worked alongside the infantry training company, and these trainers were particularly valued, as I’ll discuss later.
There is also a small team of specialists in countering improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Eight Canadian Armed Forces personnel in the field of explosive ordnance disposal and IED disposal pre-deployed to observe training, and prepare training plans for Canadian military engineers who arrived with the main body. The Canadians, in particular RCN clearance divers, work with Ukrainian soldiers to enhance counter-IED operations with explosive ordnance disposal and IED disposal instruction at the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence Demining Centre in Kamyanets-Podilsky. Canada also sent a small contingent of Military Police who are working with their Ukrainian counterparts in Kiev. Outside the capital of Kiev, Canadian Military Police trainers are teaching specialized courses on the use of force and investigation techniques to their Ukrainian counterparts.

Much of the challenge regarding doctrinal, operational and cultural transformation is reflected in the uniforms of the Ukrainian military, which still bear Soviet design, with many of their insignia and medals appearing to be Soviet. That is part of their military tradition, much like the appearance of the Canadian army’s uniforms – and Canadian navy and air force – recall British roots. The irony here is that Ukraine is now fighting forces believed to be supported and often supplemented by Russia (although this is denied by President Vladimir Putin), two countries that were both part of Soviet military training and tradition.

So what is Canada doing to help facilitate this transformation? According to Lieutenant-Colonel Guiney:

We are very much involved. When we first went in, we thought we were to train them at the tactical level and train them in the skills. But we discovered that their institutions needed attention as well. They are a very top-heavy, Soviet-type armed forces, so decision-making is centralized at the top and there is a very rigid command structure completely different than anything we are used to here in the West. And there is a huge appetite for reform, much like there is a huge appetite for political reform, there is a huge appetite for military reform, particularly among the younger generation. They have a long and challenging path ahead of them.

Canadians may think that the Canadian Forces are spending all their time teaching military skills to the Ukrainian forces, but that isn’t necessarily the case. “If I were asked about the biggest challenge my soldiers and I faced while we were there, I would say it’s the military culture,” Lieu-

tenant-Colonel Guiney explained. “The Ukrainian armed forces still retain the old guard who were in the Soviet military.” This means that the military culture reflects the Soviet traditions, and this has led to a clash “with the modern day generation of highly-motivated, patriotic young military members, and recruits who come into this antiquated system.” According to Guiney, the mobilization system is also antiquated. And it’s extremely hard to re-organize the military while you’re trying to fight a conflict within your territory.

In some ways, this experience parallels the experiences of the Canadian Armed Forces, as an example. That institution went through a huge transformation following operations in Somalia in the early 1990s and through operations in Afghanistan. The Canadian military is known to be an adaptable military force, able to accept change and to be flexible in its ability to integrate new technologies and embrace new concepts of military doctrine and operations. Yet it took decades for the Canadian military to arrive where it is today. “So you can imagine having this old bureaucratic system that is resistant to change while at the same time you are trying to transform it,” said Guiney. But he notes that “we are not there to reform the Ukrainian military, we are there to help them reform themselves.”

Holistically, the training is going well. ROTO 0’s first attention was to two Ukrainian units which had freshly rotated out of the Donbass region. They were the first to receive instruction from Canada’s military representatives at the tactical level. These Ukrainian soldiers came from the front lines and were a cross-section of differing levels of experience and expertise, from some who had been there for a year to troops who had just been mobilized. Most appreciated the relevance and usefulness of the training. In particular, the first aid training was valued. Every Canadian soldier is trained to a very high standard of combat-related first aid, but currently Ukrainian forces receive virtually none.

The Canadian task force adopts a collaborative approach to the training program, recognizing that the Ukrainian military’s methods of conducting tactical training are very different than Canada’s. It is as much a learning experience for the Canadians as it is for the Ukrainians. The Canadian mentors and instructors do not simply say ‘here is the right way to do things.’ They listen to their clients, prepare a training plan and adapt it to the Ukrainian concept of operations at the front. “You have to be able to train them in ways that they can use,” Guiney underscored.

Their Ukrainian colleagues and counterparts proved to be
very receptive. There is a huge appetite among the Defence Ministry and senior military staff to train to the NATO standard, to align themselves more with NATO and to become more interoperable with the alliance’s member states. The Ukrainian military is very enthusiastic to learn NATO’s operational processes and doctrines.

The Canadian instructors work closely with Americans and Lithuanians, and to a lesser degree, the British, and endeavour to demonstrate that the program is more than simply teaching soldiers to shoot better and how to do first aid. As Guiney noted, “we are doing more than just training their soldiers in specific skills. We’re also training their instructional cadre, we’re training the trainers, so that when we leave, either at the end of this mandate, or later, if the Canadian government decides to extend the mandate, we leave them with the ability to train themselves.”

Ukraine also needs to invest in doctrinal, institutional and organizational level reform and it needs to develop a professional non-commissioned officer (NCO) corps. Ukraine’s long-time military experience is based on Soviet doctrine and organization, which assigns to sometimes very senior commissioned officers responsibilities and training which in the Canadian Army would be accomplished by non-commissioned officers. “One of the many strengths of the Canadian Army is our very experienced NCOs, the backbone of the Army, who can leverage experience not only from Afghanistan but also from humanitarian operations, from peace support and peacekeeping missions,” Guiney effused with obvious pride. As he said,

We have a phenomenal professional development system in the Canadian Army in particular, and in the Canadian Armed Forces in general. All Canadian military personnel have leadership training, marksmanship and medical instruction, and when you do security force capacity building all those skills come out. The quality and effectiveness is drawn from missions and operations, and rather than using them on an adversary, we are imparting them to the Ukrainian troops. That’s the most important aspect of what we did over there. We applied what we did on the training mission.

It’s important not to see Operation Unifier as a one-way street. Guiney made it clear to his own personnel and to
his Ukrainian colleagues that Canadian forces are there to learn as well as to teach and train. “Both Ukrainian and Canadian Armed Forces have benefitted from Operation Unifier. More than just basic training, this is an opportunity for exchanging real life military and battlefield experiences,” said Canadian Ambassador to Ukraine, Roman Waschuk. Because there are Russian weapons systems being deployed in the Donbass conflict, the Canadian personnel learned a lot about modern Russian weapon systems, capabilities and weaknesses. Guiney noted that:

We brought back a lot of lessons learned from the Donbass region, a lot about how Russian-backed insurgents conduct their fighting. We learned about the tactics that are being employed there. These are great lessons for the Canadian Army, and it’s a bit of a wake-up call to what NATO is calling hybrid warfare. In Donbass the Ukrainians are facing conventional tank-on-tank, insurgents, road-side bombs, electronic warfare, unmanned aerial vehicles, and we are able to get a window on that, and bring it back to Canada.

Furthermore, this training and instruction goes to the very root of interoperability. This permits military participants who previously had incompatible doctrine, training and education to work cooperatively in international military operations. “IED training, for example,” Guiney noted, “is the same type of training conducted by the United States, the United Kingdom and other allied nations, so if we co-locate we can expect that same level of quality and effectiveness from them.” This introduction to interoperability means that Ukrainian forces – while not members of NATO – may be able to work effectively with NATO forces in, for example, UN peacekeeping operations in the future.

Following any deployment, after-action reports are written. These reports, Guiney explained, capture “our observations, our experiences with the mission, what we did well, what we could have done better, as well as lessons learned, based on what the Ukrainians are telling us is going on in Donbass. We do this so the next Canadian ROTO can build on our experience.” These elements also find their way into the army’s professional development sessions, the results of which can then be incorporated into the training, tactics and operations as extremely detailed knowledge and observations, some of which is classified and some not.

**Conclusion**

Under the previous federal government Canada was very vocal about Russia’s occupation of Crimea and its interference in Donbass. By putting 200 Canadian soldiers on the ground in western Ukraine, Canada is standing behind its statements, and standing with partners in an area where Russian and Canadian interests are colliding. The current government is less vocal but has not ended the operation. Canadian forces are in the region at the request of the Ukrainian government to help Ukraine, a friend in need.

By June 2016, about a year after the mission had started, more than 1,300 Ukrainian Armed Forces members had participated in the individual training provided by the Canadian Armed Forces. The training is conducted in specific areas such as small team training, combat first aid, explosive ordnance disposal and IED disposal, military police techniques, logistics modernization, flight safety training and other training under the Military Training and Cooperation Program (MTCP).

Lieutenant-Colonel Guiney described his enduring sentiment from his experience in Ukraine:

It was an honour to be part of that mission. I really believe what Canada is doing there is the right thing. Canadians can be proud of their men and women in uniform, not just in Ukraine, but throughout the world. Of all the things I’ve done, from peacekeeping to war fighting, this was one of the most challenging and rewarding endeavours I’ve done. I walk away feeling proud not only of our soldiers, the Canadian Army and the Canadian Armed Forces, but also of Canada, writ large.

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