

INCREDIBLE LIFE OF GENERAL SYRSKYI

# Meet Ukraine's national hero... at war with the country where he was born

**T**HE FRONTLINE is my life, declares General Oleksandr Syrskyi, the man whose battlefield skills could determine the result of Ukraine's brutal on-going war with Russia. Like the bravest military leaders, he is prepared to lead by example and to share the dangers of the men under his command.

It is no surprise that Syrskyi, appointed as Commander-in-Chief of Ukraine's Armed Forces seven months ago, feels comfortable in the trenches, even if sometimes they are located less than a mile from the enemy.

He has, after all, not simply been fighting Russians since the all-out war began in February 2022, but has been confronting the illegal acts of Ukraine's neighbouring power for more than a decade.

In the West it is sometimes forgotten that in February and March 2014, Russia illegally invaded the Crimean Peninsula, part of Ukraine, and then annexed it.

Soon afterwards, Russia also expanded its military influence into parts of the Donbas and Luhansk regions.

During a recent interview with Christiane Amanpour for CNN, the General was asked about his relationship with his soldiers.

"We speak the same language. We understand each other no matter who I am talking to, whether it is an ordinary soldier, a rifleman, a brigade commander or a battalion commander," he replied.

But who is this four-star general in whom President Zelensky has entrusted not just his own future, but arguably the future of the entire nation?

What are his characteristics? How close is his relationship with the President? How and why did he mastermind the daring

**'We understand each other... soldiers speak the same language'**

incursion into Russia just weeks ago?

Like every politician and military leader in Ukraine, or indeed elsewhere, Syrskyi has his critics as well as his supporters.

He has been called the "Meat General" and the "butcher of Bakhmut". But are such labels fair? To answer those questions and many more, I spoke to some of those who know him best.

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.

As a teenager, and inspired and encouraged by his father, he became set on a career in the Army. He studied at the Moscow Higher Military Command School, the leading military training school in the Soviet Union at the time.

He arrived in Ukraine for the first time soon after completing his training, with an appointment in Chernihiv. It was not a coveted role and resulted from a spat with a senior officer who thought it would be something of a punishment.

Syrskyi, however, made a success of the posting and soon gained a series of promotions. He served in Afghanistan, the Tajik SSR and Czechoslovakia before the break-up of the Soviet Union.

But by this point he regarded Ukraine as his home. After Ukraine gained independence in 1991, when Syrskyi was aged 26, he was absorbed into the Ukrainian military.

Shortly after independence he took an oath of allegiance to Ukraine that his friends say was, and is, all-important to him.

So after Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, there was only ever going to be one side he'd be fighting on.

In early 2015, after the annexation of Crimea and as Russians tried to seize more Ukrainian territory, he left his mark by



His future may have been mapped out when he was born into a military family in a rural village of the then-Soviet Union in 1965. However, few would have predicted that Oleksandr Stanislavovych Syrskyi would one day be leading the line in a 21st century war against his home country. LORD ASHCROFT looks at the life and career of this extraordinary general



**TACTICS:** Syrskyi with Ukraine's leader Volodymyr Zelensky



**INCURSION:** Damaged building in Kursk, where Ukraine has taken control



**REPLACED:** General Valerii Zaluzhnyi in Kyiv in 2022

leading thousands of Ukrainian soldiers to safety when they were virtually encircled by Russian soldiers in and around the city of Debaltseve. Without Syrskyi's courageous intervention, these troops would almost certainly have been butchered.

After 2015 he served in eastern Ukraine, pitting his wits against the country of his birth, military officers he knew well and the country where members of his close family still lived. Syrskyi is twice married with a son by each wife. He guards his privacy and has few close friends in the Army, preferring

to keep such relationships entirely professional. Yet, with friends outside the Army, he is said to be open, charming and loyal, with a good sense of humour.

He demands the highest standards of discipline and fitness from his men yet, once again, broad shouldered but slim, he leads by example. Despite turning 60 next year, he still likes to run six miles a day and he regularly works out in the gym.

Friends say he is intelligent and strategic, an excellent mathematician and a keen chess player. He loves military history and

has studied battlefield tactics spanning from the Romans to beyond the Second World War. However, since the all-out war with Russia began, he has discarded most of his hobbies and regularly survives on less than five hours' sleep a night.

When Ukraine was invaded on February 24, 2022, Syrskyi was head of Ukraine's ground forces, effectively deputy to General Valerii Zaluzhnyi. Immediately after the invasion he distinguished himself, masterminding the successful defence of Kyiv.

However, this was only possible because

he had anticipated the invasion weeks before and made meticulous preparations for the defence of the city.

As early as April 2022 he was named as a Hero of Ukraine, the country's highest bravery award. Later that year he played another key role, recapturing parts of the Kharkiv region while once again displaying both courage and tactical nous.

His critics claim that as well as these two great victories, he should also take partial responsibility for the death of thousands of soldiers in the defence of Bakhmut, which

fell to the Russians in May 2023 after a bloody 10-month battle.

His supporters, however, blame political opponents for wrongly suggesting in the media that he is careless with the lives of his men. As for the loss of Bakhmut, they say the city would have fallen far earlier if it had not been for Syrskyi making the best of an impossible situation in which his men were outnumbered and outgunned.

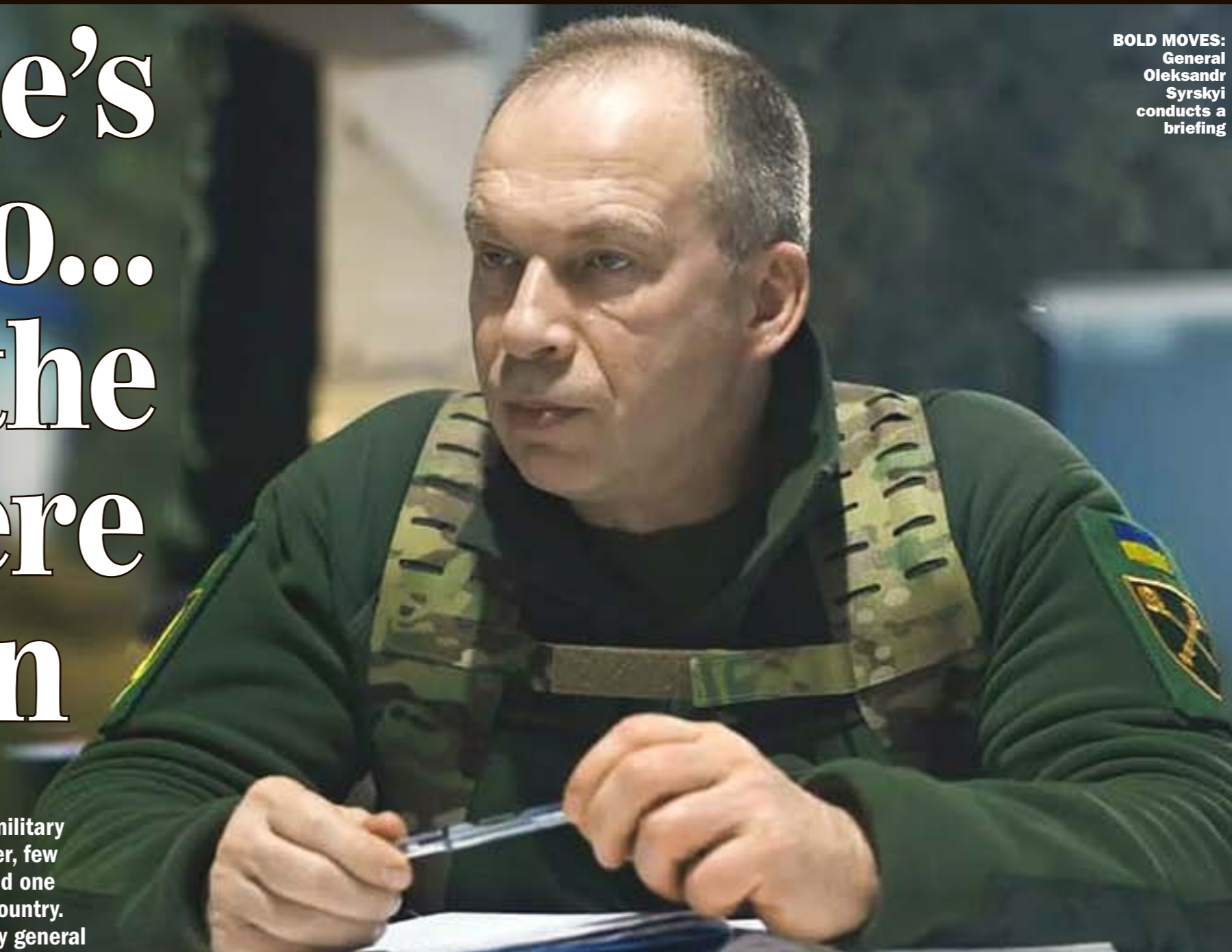
Throughout the war, Syrskyi has retained the support and respect of Volodymyr Zelensky, so much so that, when the

President fell out with Zaluzhnyi early this year, Syrskyi was named as his successor as Commander-in-Chief. Political sources say he got the role entirely on merit, and because Zelensky admired his professionalism, commitment and tactical skills.

Zaluzhnyi's sacking, however, surprised and angered many Ukrainians, especially as he was popular with rank and file troops.

Zaluzhnyi was given the job of Ukrainian ambassador to the UK. Most Ukrainians do not see it as a coincidence that such a role, prestigious though it is, keeps

**BOLD MOVES:** General Oleksandr Syrskyi conducts a briefing



Zaluzhnyi out of his homeland. Nobody doubted that Syrskyi had a tough job from the start of his new role, with supplies of weapons and ammunition at an all-time low.

When I visited the frontline city of Lyman in the bitter cold in February, the month of his appointment, soldiers complained they could only fire a single artillery shell in response to 10 incoming ones from the Russians.

However, Syrskyi steadied the ship and left his mark, before both creating and masterminding a daring raid on Russia last month, with an incursion into its Kursk region. It was the first time in 80 years that enemy soldiers had captured Russian soil.

Senior sources told me that to ensure secrecy Syrskyi worked exclusively with the President, and a handful of his most trusted officers and military intelligence experts. By pulling off the coup he answered criticisms that he was too conservative and cautious.

The Kursk incursion was a huge gamble that embarrassed and angered the Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Eventually, Ukraine claimed to have seized 500 square miles of Russian territory.

The incursion acted as a huge boost to morale for Ukrainian people. For most of 2024, bad news had been heaped on more bad news as the Russians gradually picked off villages and towns along the frontline.

Syrskyi admitted in his CNN interview that he was glad to have boosted spirits.

"This significantly improved the morale of not only the military but the entire Ukrainian population," he said.

Furthermore, Syrskyi believes that Russia had intended to use Kursk as a springboard to attack Ukraine, and the incursion had scuppered this apparent plan.

"We chose the weakest point in the enemy's defence, in the enemy's structure."

**'We chose the weakest point in the enemy's defence'**

"We moved the fighting to the enemy's territory so that he could feel what we feel every day," the General revealed.

"In addition, we took a sufficient number of prisoners. We created an 'exchange fund' in order to release our military personnel who are in captivity."

Syrskyi has been lauded at home for his daring. Some Ukrainian MPs have compared him to "Ukrainian Zhukov", a reference to General Georgy Zhukov, who led the Red Army to defeat the Nazis.

All in all, his first seven months in the job have gone well. Of course, there have been setbacks for Syrskyi too, but few of his own making. With the Russians still having far more men and more ammunition in the battle for Pokrovsk, Ukraine looks likely to lose the strategically important frontline city within weeks.

Earlier this month, further pressure was applied on the entire Ukrainian military with the decision by the US still not to allow Ukraine to strike military targets inside Russia with Western-supplied long-range missiles. It came after threats by President Putin that such a move would be tantamount to Nato being at war with Russia.

Syrskyi, like his President, is said to be both disappointed and baffled by the West's indecision. The future for Ukraine, its Armed Forces and its Commander-in-Chief is, once again, shrouded in uncertainty.

One thing, however, is certain: General Oleksandr Syrskyi will not shirk the fight.

As one close friend put it: "Russia gave him his education and training but Ukraine gave him his calling."

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