

Psycho-Emotional State of Ukrainian Soldiers Before Going to the Frontline

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Abstract: *The aim of the study is to investigate the psychological state of the soldiers before they go to the battle space. The article shows the Assessment of people's behavior, their psycho-emotional characteristics, and the degree of their adaptability in extreme conditions. This interest has increased even further due to the intensification of hostilities in Ukraine since February 2022 after the invasion of Russian forces on its territory. Extreme situations, including military conflicts, largely affect people's ability to withstand stress, and their willingness to survive these events safely and develop a sufficient degree of adaptability in themselves. Researchers examine the psycho-emotional state of an individual from the standpoint of different theoretical positions. Conclusions. This study has shown that the current psycho-emotional state of Ukrainian military personnel who are preparing to go to the front line is characterized by a low degree of anxiety, increased aggressiveness, and the ability to adapt to environmental conditions easily, set goals and achieve them. At the same time, the military of Ukraine also show symptoms of stress, and some signs of neuropsychic instability, psychopathy, hysteria, paranoia, and psychasthenia. These personality traits may be directly related to the nature of their professional activities and an increased sense of awareness of their own significance and importance in combat conditions. In general, the listed features of the psycho-emotional state are evidence of the readiness of Ukrainian service members to participate in the war and their ability to perform their duties effectively.*

Keywords: *war in Ukraine; Ukrainian Soldiers; Psycho-Emotional State and Characteristics; Psycho-Emotional Characteristic; Frontline; ability to withstand stress; emotional stability; mental and emotional reaction.*

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1. Introduction

Assessment of people's behavior, their psycho-emotional characteristics, and the degree of their adaptability in extreme conditions are the focus of attention of psychologists and researchers in some other areas today. This interest has increased even further due to the intensification of hostilities in Ukraine since February 2022 after the invasion of Russian forces on its territory. Extreme situations, including military conflicts, largely affect people's ability to withstand stress, and their willingness to survive these events safely and develop a sufficient degree of adaptability in themselves. According to Kolesnichenko et al. (2016), in the last decade, the military personnel of Ukraine, whose service and combat activities are constantly associated with threats to their life and health, have been in the most extreme conditions. The consequence of this situation is the growth of research interest in the issue of the psycho-emotional readiness of the Ukrainian military to participate in active hostilities. Kolesnichenko et al. (2016) note that studies on the psychological readiness of persons liable for military service are still at the stage of methodological development, and the existing literature has multiple gaps on this topic. In its totality, psychological readiness includes a variety of areas of the individual's psycho-emotional state, including psychological stability, emotional stability, and willingness to take risks. In addition, it is important to get an understanding of human behavior under stress, which may include an analysis of their stress resistance level, neuropsychic stability, and mental and emotional states. It is necessary to note that according to preliminary data, at least 700 thousand Ukrainians have been involved in military service since the beginning of the full-scale war in Ukraine after February 24, 2022 (Balachuk, 2022). Moreover, an increase in this number by another 100,000 people is planned for next year. These facts make it necessary to update the study of their readiness for active combat operations. In this regard, the aim of this study is to assess the current psycho-emotional state of Ukrainian service members who are sent to the front line, and the degree of their readiness or unreadiness for military service.

2. Literature Review

Psycho-Emotional States and Characteristics

Researchers examine the psycho-emotional state of an individual from the standpoint of different theoretical positions. Harkusha et al. (2020) propose to consider this topic from the perspective of stress resistance,

which is understood as a person's ability to maintain mental harmony in different emotional situations. The authors argue that the reverse side of stress resistance is the person's inadequate response to events and lack of flexibility in responding to them. The researchers also see the concept of stress resistance as a combination of emotional, volitional, and intellectual personality traits that ensure the effective achievement of a goal by a person under stress. According to Harkusha et al. (2020), the psycho-emotional state of an individual may also be viewed in terms of his or her cognitive complexity. It is assumed that a cognitively complex person has a better self-identification, adapts more easily to the conditions of the surrounding world and is more tolerant of changes in social values. Another important psycho-emotional characteristic of a person is the degree of their anxiety. Harkusha et al. (2020) indicate that the degree of anxiety should be understood as a person's inclination to perceive any surrounding situations as threatening. To some extent, anxiety is a natural adaptive mechanism of an individual, providing support for their instinct for self-preservation. Nevertheless, according to the researchers, anxiety is a negative characteristic of a person, indicating the presence of psychosomatic disorders. A significant contribution to the understanding of anxiety as an element of the psycho-emotional state of an individual has been made by Malysheva & Lytvyn (2021). In particular, the authors consider the concept and types of neuroticism, defining it as a personality trait that prevents a person from returning to a normal psychological state. Malysheva & Lytvyn (2021) show that neuroticism has two directions - lability and alienation, adherence to which helps to understand the mental or emotional state of an individual. In the first case, a person is prone to an active protection from any troubles, which is expressed in the presence of his or her emotional instability and disorganization. In the second case, an individual is more inclined to avoid trouble, which manifests itself through his or her states of uncertainty, deterioration in purposefulness, and lack of courage. In this regard, the characteristics of the psycho-emotional aspects and behavior of a person can also be used to assess the psychological and emotional state of Ukrainian military personnel, including their psychological readiness for military service and the determinants of their unpreparedness.

Psycho-Emotional Reactions to Stressful Events

Any stressful event causes a corresponding mental and emotional reaction, which may differ depending on the impact of external or internal factors. One of the most common responses to an extreme event is fear. There are different methods for assessing and analyzing fear, depending on

the nature of its source. For example, Sawicki et al. (2022), in their study focusing on individuals' fear of the Covid-19 pandemic, use the FCV-19S questionnaire, which provides a clear understanding of the states of interviewed participants, their attitudes towards the threat, and psychological consequences. The authors point out that there are also many additional determinants that shape people's feelings of fear, such as their gender, access to health care, willingness to self-medicate, and degree of trust in media sources. In other words, when evaluating fear as an element of a person's psycho-emotional state under conditions of stressful events, it is also necessary to take into account additional social factors. At the same time, Rybinska et al. (2021), in their article, argue that stressful situations can also have a positive effect on a person's psychological or emotional resilience. In particular, their study of the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on society on a global scale has revealed that the stress experienced during the pandemic has increased the manifestations of many virtues. The global outbreak of Covid-19 has resulted in significant expressions of personality traits such as courage, wisdom, and justice. In the context of the global crisis, society has rallied, uniting their interests and setting common goals. In this regard, it is possible to conclude that extreme situations can motivate the involved target audience to demonstrate the required human qualities, which should also be taken into account when analyzing the readiness of the Ukrainian service members for combat operations.

The need to interact closely with other living people, especially in a stressful situation, can lead to another common reaction, such as burnout. Presumably, this reaction can also be considered as one of the features of the psycho-emotional state of Ukrainian service members, given the nature of their activities. Rybinska et al. (2022), in their article, provide a good understanding of the causes of burnout. The authors of the study analyze the degree of emotional burnout of IT industry specialists, who are divided into a group that works with clients (FrontEnd) and a group that does not contact them. The researchers found that members of the group labeled FrontEnd had the most symptoms of burnout. In other words, the need to interact closely with people leads to increased professional exhaustion of an individual and the emergence of a sense of resistance to events.

Another important psychological reaction that attracts the attention of researchers is an individual's resistance to stressful events. The study by McAndrew et al. (2017) has made significant contributions in this area. In particular, the authors argue that participation in extreme situations does not necessarily have negative consequences for a person, and a larger part of society is characterized by sufficient psychological resistance to them.

According to the researchers, more than 6% of individuals who have experienced a stressful event retain their functionality after its termination. As evidence, McAndrew et al. (2017) cite the results of evaluating combatants in Afghanistan and Iraq for symptoms of PTSD. The results of the study have made it possible to find out that 80% of veterans do not have mental disorders, and this fact is largely determined by the high degree of cohesion of their units during the war. In this regard, the psychological stability of the Ukrainian military is an important characteristic of their condition and their readiness to participate in battles. However, McAndrew et al. (2017) do not indicate which specific determinants might increase or decrease their preparedness in the context of the war in Ukraine, confirming the relevance of the current study.

Psycho-Emotional Characteristics of Individuals in the Conditions of Military Operations

Military actions and conflicts should be considered an important determinant and significant stressful event that could directly affect the psycho-emotional state of an individual. According to data from the study by Roberts et al. (2019), before the start of full-scale aggression by Russia, in Ukraine, there were more than one and a half million people forced to leave their permanent place of residence due to armed confrontations. According to a preliminary estimate, about 22% of them experienced symptoms of depression, 17% indicated an increase in their feelings of anxiety, and 32% were diagnosed with PTSD, indicating a significant impact of the war as a stressful event on the state of an individual. Important results have also been obtained in the study by Kurapov et al. (2022), which concerned the assessment of the psycho-emotional state of university students and faculty in response to the military situation in Ukraine. According to the authors, the state of the vast majority (97.8%) of the study participants worsened, symptoms of depression and anxiety were found in 84% of them, and almost 77% of the respondents noted their increased feelings of anger (Kurapov et al., 2022). In addition, participants in the study reported an increase in their feelings of fear and an increased propensity to take psychoactive or narcotic substances. Accordingly, the authors have concluded that persons involved in military conflicts are more likely to develop PTSD and experience deterioration in their psycho-emotional state.

Singh et al. (2021) also attempted to examine aspects of the mental and psychosocial health of Ukrainians who experienced or were directly involved in hostilities. In particular, the study participants included combat veterans and internally displaced persons. As a result, the authors have

concluded that both internally displaced persons and war veterans face frequent manifestations of symptoms of psychological stress, which is expressed in the presence of their increased anxiety, intrusive memories, feelings of loneliness, isolation, and depression. In addition, all the participants report having a feeling of poor social adaptation. These results largely overlap with those of the study by Yanchuk et al. (2020), which confirms that more than half of the Ukrainian military personnel who took part in the ATO/OOS (anti-terrorist operation/joint forces operation) have some symptoms of post-traumatic nervous disorder. In addition, the respondents indicated that they had a feeling of maladaptation and other dissociative symptoms. Yanchuk et al. (2020) also note that the combatants experience feelings such as fear, horror, or a state of helplessness. In turn, the study by Pavlova et al. (2020) also has important research value. Its authors consider the factors that influence the degree of anxiety of Ukrainian men who are subject to conscription for military service. The researchers confirm that those who are to participate in hostilities experience a high degree of anxiety. At the same time, the degree of anxiety is also influenced by such determinants as the quality of life of the conscript. In particular, men whose standard of living was lower were more anxious. It is necessary to note that Pavlova et al. (2020) have concluded that a high degree of anxiety directly correlates with the degree of adaptation of an individual to stressful events. In particular, the authors suggest that conscripts who experience anxiety will be more prepared for military action, as they will soberly and objectively assess the danger. However, their study does not explain the effect of anxiety on the readiness of Ukrainian men for military service.

Soldiers' Adaptability, Motivation, and Readiness for Military Actions

There is a very limited number of studies that address the readiness, motivation, and adaptability of the Ukrainian military to participate in active hostilities. However, some researchers have made several attempts to shed light on this topic. In particular, Prykhodko et al. (2019), in their study, have found that the motivation of military officers is higher than that of contracted service members. The authors have also found that the reasons for the military leaving the service may be their disappointment in their actions or a feeling of fatigue. In turn, the article by Prykhodko et al. (2021) considers aspects of the psychological readiness of the Ukrainian military personnel in more detail. The study focuses on military personnel who have already had experience in combat operations in eastern Ukraine since 2014. The obtained results indicate that an important component of the psychological readiness of the Ukrainian military for risk is their strong sense

of patriotism, the ability to mobilize quickly, strong willpower, and positive experience of team cohesion. Another significant psychological component is the level of hardiness and endurance, which positively correlates with the ability of military personnel to control the situation around, navigate in a difficult environment, overcome difficulties and create goals.

Prykhodko et al. (2020), in their study, focus on the psycho-emotional characteristics of Ukrainian military personnel more deeply. A survey of ATO/OOS participants has shown that more than half of them have a high degree of adaptability to stress in active military operations. At the same time, approximately 14% may show symptoms of psychopathy, which are expressed in reduced hardiness, deviant behavior, and increased conflict. Loganovsky et al. (2017), in their article, also dwell on the psycho-neurological characteristics of combatants, but their study is focused on military personnel who have already had combat experience in the ATO/OOS zone. The researchers note the presence of pronounced symptoms of PTSD in the fighters, including insomnia, depression, somatic disorders, and cognitive impairment. In this regard, according to available sources, it is already known that the presence of combat experience can affect the readiness of Ukrainian military personnel to participate in hostilities. Still, there are no studies that would update the readiness and psycho-emotional state of soldiers after the intensification of the military conflict after the start of the Russian invasion on February 24, 2022.

3. Conceptual Framework of the Study

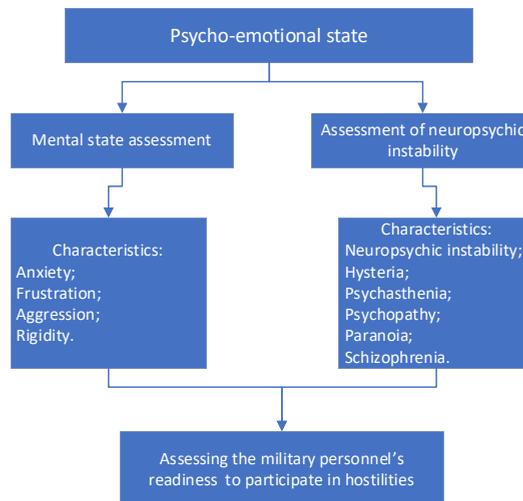


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Study

Source: Authors' own conception

The conceptual scheme of the study is shown in Figure 1. In this regard, the current study considers two sets of variables. The first group is the psycho-emotional state of the Ukrainian military, whose assessment is derived based on identifying the severity of a number of mental characteristics. The first subgroup of characteristics is examined by using Horska's technique, built on the basis of Eysenck's questionnaire. In particular, the purpose of the analysis of the first group of characteristics is to determine the degree of personal anxiety of individuals, their frustration, aggression, and rigidity. The second subgroup of characteristics includes aspects of neuropsychic instability determined by using the NPN-A questionnaire, based on the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI). In this case, the assessment is aimed at the mental state of an individual within the framework of the presence of clinical disorders such as neuropsychological instability, hysteria, psychasthenia, psychopathy, paranoia, and schizophrenia. According to preliminary expectations, a high degree of severity of negative manifestations would be evidence of the Ukrainian military's low readiness for combat service, and vice versa.

4. Research Method

This study is quantitative, which is predetermined by the need to evaluate the degree of severity of some characteristics of the Ukrainian military personnel's psycho-emotional state in numerical terms. Data were collected through two questionnaires. The first questionnaire was built on the methodology proposed by Horska (1994). This technique, in turn, is an adaptation of the Eysenck questionnaire that is designed to determine the various mental states that an interviewed individual can identify in oneself. In total, the questionnaire contains 40 statements, which allow concluding that the individual has or does not have a tendency to anxiety (anxiety), sensations of obstacles (frustration), psychological activity through the method of aggression (aggression), and difficulties in transforming activities (rigidity). The survey participants were required to rate each statement from 2 to 0, where 2 is full support for the statement, and 0 is disagreement with it. The second tool is the Neuro-Psychic Imbalance-Accentuation (NPN-A) questionnaire, adapted from the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, to measure a variety of mental states and personality traits. Each participant had to answer each question positively or negatively.

The data collection used standardized Google forms posted on social media and freely available to everyone. A prerequisite for participation in the study was the participant's willingness, ability, or likelihood to go to the front. Persons who did not fall under the mobilization were the exclusion

criterion. To date, 422 people have completed Horska's questionnaire, and 210 have completed the NPN-A questionnaire. The obtained data were analyzed using the IBM SPSS tools. In particular, special attention was paid to descriptive statistics, which showed the average score for each of the studied characteristics.

5. Results

The results of the study can be divided into two groups: the results of Horska's questionnaire, and the results of the NPN-A questionnaire. In the research process, 422 people gave answers to Horska's questionnaire. In turn, only 210 of them completed the other questionnaire.

The results of Horska's questionnaire. The obtained results show that most Ukrainian service members do not feel anxious about their upcoming deployment to the front line. In particular, the participants' average score on the anxiety scale is 3.55, which indicates a low level of anxiety (less than 7 points), according to Horska's method. Similar results have been obtained for such a characteristic as frustration: the average score for the degree of disappointment due to the inability to fulfill or achieve any goals is 2.95, which is also a low indicator (less than 7 points). More people have reported having dynamic behavior accompanied by aggression. However, the overall average score has not exceeded 4.4, which is a positive indicator. Finally, the average score for the degree of rigidity of the respondents is 4.7, a low score according to Horska's method. However, the figures differ when considering the results as a percentage. In this case, 58% of the respondents among the Ukrainian military going to the front line have shown a low level of anxiety. At the same time, 37% of the respondents report that they have the anxiety of a medium degree, and only 2.6% of participants report their anxiety to a degree above average. Finally, 1.18% of the participants show a high degree of anxiety. The results also indicate that individuals with a low degree of frustration make up more than 66%, and 28.9% report moderate frustration with their activities. Only 1.89% of the participants have above-average frustration, and 0.94% have high frustration. It is important to note that only 35% of the participants have identified a low degree of aggression, while the average or above average degree of aggression has been found in 61.6% of the respondents. Another 1.89% of the participants have shown a high degree of aggression in behavior. Finally, it has been found that 25.8% of the respondents have a low degree of rigidity. At the same time, the remaining percentage of the participants demonstrate a medium or high degree of rigidity.

Results of the NPN-A questionnaire. The obtained results show that the average score on the scale of neuropsychic instability of the respondents is 8.35, indicating a significant severity of the corresponding signs. Individuals with a high score on the scale of neuropsychic instability are characterized by weak adaptive abilities, problems in interpersonal relationships, lack of objective self-esteem, and some manifestations of deviant behavior. The average score of the respondents on the 'hysteria' scale is 4.36, which is a borderline indicator and implies the presence of these signs. In particular, such individuals are characterized by the presence of a strong desire for recognition, a tendency to exaggerate, egocentrism, and a desire to be in the spotlight. As for the 'psychasthenia' scale, the respondents have scored an average of 5.8 points, which also indicates the presence of these signs in their personality traits. At the same time, the individuals show self-doubt, anxiety, suspiciousness, and an increased sense of vulnerability. On the 'psychopathy' and 'paranoia' scales, the participants have scored an average of 5.3 points, which also indicates these traits in them. Such individuals are characterized as aggressive, persistent, and straightforward. They tend to fight for justice and stand up for their beliefs. Finally, the results on the 'schizophrenia' scale show an average score of 7.08, indicating an acceptable norm for these signs. In particular, individuals with such personality traits are less likely to jump to conclusions and do not show emotional coldness or an inability to understand others.

Discussion

The study results provide several important findings regarding the psycho-emotional characteristics of Ukrainian service members and their readiness to engage in hostilities. In particular, it has been found that the Ukrainian military do not tend to experience excessive anxiety in anticipation of going to the front line and are characterized by a low or unexpressed degree of frustration, indicating their ability to set and achieve goals and be satisfied with the outcomes of their actions. It is possible to assume that this state is ensured by their positive response to stressful events, which occurs in extreme or crisis situations, a result consistent with the findings of the study by Rybinska et al. (2021). In particular, the need to participate in hostilities can increase the emotional stability of Ukrainian military personnel, strengthen or stimulate their courage and help shape their common goals and ideology that dull the feeling of anxiety. In addition, the surveyed service members have a low degree of rigidity, indicating their sufficient flexibility and good tendency to adapt against the background of events or changes in the environment. These results can be explained with

the help of the study by Prykhodko et al. (2021), according to which the adaptability of military personnel in the performance of their duties is developed against the background of their strong-willed qualities and high level of patriotism. At the same time, the survey has shown that Ukrainian service members demonstrate a high degree of aggression, and these data are unique in light of the research literature already reviewed. Indeed, most of the earlier studies, such as Yanchuk et al. (2020), Singh et al. (2021), Prykhodko et al. (2020), and Loganovsky et al. (2017), report feelings of helplessness and depression in military personnel. However, as this study has shown, the current state of the Ukrainian military is characterized by greater proactivity in their behavior and the presence of aggression, which is natural in the context of the Russian invasion. This result can be considered one of the options for the adaptive response of military personnel to ongoing events, enhancing their emotional resilience.

At the same time, the NPN-A questionnaire used in this study has made it possible to consider some of the accentuations of the attitudes of the Ukrainian military and the features of their neuropsychic instability in more detail. In particular, it has revealed that neuropsychic instability in the surveyed service members is pronounced. This fact may be evidence of the symptoms of depression or stress, which has already been found in studies by Loganovsky et al. (2017) and Yanchuk et al. (2020). A likely cause of neuropsychic instability may also be the context of the situation, which requires conflict interaction with the adversary, and, accordingly, can lead to burnout and fatigue, as indicated in the study by Rybinska et al. (2022). It is also possible to note that the Ukrainian military show signs of hysteria, psychasthenia, psychopathy, and paranoia, which may be explained by the need to participate in hostilities and the expectation of stress (Prykhodko et al., 2020). However, as the results of the previous research show, these character accentuations can be a characteristic of the process of service members' adaptation to new stressful conditions. In this regard, taking into account the low degree of anxiety, increased aggression, high adaptability and flexibility of Ukrainian military personnel, it is possible to confirm their high degree of readiness to be sent to the front line and participate in battles.

Conclusion

This study has shown that the current psycho-emotional state of Ukrainian military personnel who are preparing to go to the front line is characterized by a low degree of anxiety, increased aggressiveness, and the ability to adapt to environmental conditions easily, set goals and achieve them. At the same time, the military of Ukraine also show symptoms of

stress, and some signs of neuropsychic instability, psychopathy, hysteria, paranoia, and psychasthenia. These personality traits may be directly related to the nature of their professional activities and an increased sense of awareness of their own significance and importance in combat conditions. In general, the listed features of the psycho-emotional state are evidence of the readiness of Ukrainian service members to participate in the war and their ability to perform their duties effectively.

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