

[THEME MUSIC]

**CATHY WURZER:** This week's headlines on the war in Ukraine, include President Zelenskyy's visit to reclaimed territory in Ukraine after Russian troops retreated. There are also revelations of a provisional deal Russia struck with Kiev at the beginning of the war. To explore these stories and more, NPR news reporter Tim Nelson has been in touch with his long time friend and colleague Brian Bonner.

Brian is a former journalist for the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, and the former editor of the *Kyiv Post*, Ukraine's premier English language newspaper. Tim spoke with Brian earlier this morning.

**TIM NELSON:** Brian and I worked together for nearly a decade in *St. Paul*. We've been keeping in touch since the war in Ukraine started. He's been in and out of Ukraine, Germany, and the US recently. Today, he's back visiting the United States, before he returns to Europe next month. Brian welcome back to *Minnesota Now*.

**BRIAN BONNER:** Thanks for having me, Tim.

**TIM NELSON:** How are you doing these days?

**BRIAN BONNER:** I'm feeling good, based on the recent developments in the war.

**TIM NELSON:** You know, we've been hearing a lot about that. Reports of thousands of square miles coming back into Ukrainian hands, Russian troops abandoning weapons and ammunition, fleeing the country. It's hard to tell here, is this just sort of anecdotal or are there real gains being made here?

**BRIAN BONNER:** Oh, no. The sweep through northeast was real. But to put it in context, 3,800 square kilometers retaken is less than 1% of the Ukraine's whole territory of 600,000 square kilometers. So, in other words, Russia still has 20% of the country.

So-- but the big thing was the morale boost. And as far as Ukrainians are concerned, that offensive showed them, or should show the world, what they can do, if they get Western weapons, Western intelligence, combined with their desire to fight and survive.

**TIM NELSON:** And is there aid waiting for something like this to happen? I mean is there a sign that this may change minds in the rest of Europe?

**BRIAN BONNER:** Ukrainians want the West to discard the fears of Russia. The fears of escalation. As far as they're concerned, they showed that Russia not only can be beat, it's relatively easy to beat them.

Russia is-- apparently their military doctrine, and their army, are stuck in the past. They've spent some of their best forces. I don't think they're going to be able to regenerate them soon. Their weapons, their Soviet-era weapons, as you see, as we all see, are not precise. And so they're-- their bombings, are just, hail Mary, obliterate everything that or where the weapons land. I mean, it's-- Ukraine now has the initiative in the war.

**TIM NELSON:** Now, I've been seeing on TV, you know, these tearful reunions of Ukrainians. How is the country feeling right now? I mean they've got to be, there's got to be some hope on the horizon there.

**BRIAN BONNER:** You know, I think, Ukrainians are tremendously united. You can feel it, the polls show it, that's what people are saying. Ukrainians know they have to fight to the end to survive as a nation and as a people.

Russians don't. They're fighting for a salary. They're fighting for some imperial aims that they may or may not even agree with. And as we've shown, once Ukrainians are effective with weapons and intelligence, Russian soldiers are, they just run without taking their equipment.

**TIM NELSON:** But what about average Ukrainians? You know we see this territory being taken back, can they move safely back? Are people going back to their homes? Can they resume their lives, in any real fashion?

**BRIAN BONNER:** Well, some were stuck in occupied territory. And the evidence is, and the pictures show, that they're very happy to be liberated. There's a mysterious component of 3 million Ukrainians that Ukraine says were forcibly deported to Russia. We don't know the fate that they have. There's another contingent that are in the West largely. They're not coming home until either they feel safe or the war is over.

And I'll give you an example, in Kharkiv Oblast, the Russians have retreated from that. That's home to the second largest city in Ukraine. But, I mean, I know, I have lots of friends there. Many of them aren't going to go back there, because they're worried about indiscriminate bombing from Russian territory.

Well, Ukrainians are hopeful, there's a whole long list of weapons that they need to prevail. And that's fighter jets, air defenses, longer range missiles, tanks that the Germans and others are still withholding. So, they're not giddy--

**TIM NELSON:** They may not be giddy, but are they winners? I mean, this looks like a stunning victory. Is this the turning point for the war here?

**BRIAN BONNER:** I think this will go back as a turning point. But, remember, Russia still is in denial about this. You know when they lost in Kiev, in the early days, they portrayed it as strategic regrouping. Which is the same thing they're doing now.

The offensive is going on, as I understand it, it's just slower. But what's really a turning point is, as I understand it, is that US intelligence sharing with Ukraine is now very time sensitive, operational, and there's a lot more cohesion between Ukraine and their Western allies in prosecuting this war or defending the nation.

**TIM NELSON:** You've been a critic of Putin in the past. A close observer at the very least. You know we're seeing some reports of sharp internal criticism of his conduct and the war. You know, even nationalists are questioning leadership on state media. Is Russia capable of looking at this and making change?

**BRIAN BONNER:** Well, I don't think they are. The hope is that this really accelerates the end of Imperial Russia. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, they haven't discarded their imperial ambitions. Putin wanted, and still wants to reassemble, basically, the Soviet Union.

His failures, which are clear to the world to see, and I think, the biggest thing Ukrainians want is the West to stop being afraid of Putin, stop being afraid of his escalations. He's set down red lines before, and the West has crossed them. He hasn't done anything.

Ukrainians think that there's nothing to be afraid of with Putin. It looks like increasingly, Putin's critics, inside Russia, feel the same way and are becoming emboldened.

Unbelievable debates you're seeing on Russian State TV. We should have been nice to Ukraine to what are we doing there to Putin needs to resign or he needs to replace the military. They understand what's going on, and they understand they're not winning.

**TIM NELSON:** Is there, however, the risk of some act of desperation here? A surge of forces, or even worse, you know the *Wall Street Journal* was talking about the possibility of a nuclear strike, this week to save military face.

**BRIAN BONNER:** The first thing is they talk about the general mobilization and getting more weapons escalation, more forces. But, if you look, he's avoided that, because, I think, that would create more political opposition to this war and be a bold recognition that it's not working according to plan.

Also, they lost their best forces. You can't just, as I understand it, from the best military experts, even if they started now to draft people, it's not going to help unless they change their approach to training and prosecuting war. And if you look at where they're recruiting soldiers, they're recruiting mercenaries, prisoners, they're getting weapons from North Korea, Iran, sounds like desperation.

**TIM NELSON:** Well to close things out here, I want to go back a little bit. There's been some recent discussion that Putin's chief envoy on Ukraine, may have actually struck a deal with Kiev before the war started. That there was some concession that Ukraine would stay out of NATO, but Putin rejected it, and pressed ahead with his military campaign. Do you think that really happened? Is that surprising to you?

**BRIAN BONNER:** No. It's not surprising that Putin would reject it. It was never about Ukraine joining NATO. Ukraine was not anywhere close to joining.

It's all about denying that Ukraine is a state and denying that Ukrainians are a people.

**TIM NELSON:** And how does this end? I mean, is there a peace negotiations, is there a brokered deal here That when the Russians finally pull back, how does this come to a conclusion?

**BRIAN BONNER:** Well, Ukraine is pretty clear about what it wants and more confident. And a lot of smart people think that basically, we just need to lay out what restoring territorial integrity, reparations, security guarantees in exchange for ending the war. If Russia doesn't, then give Ukraine everything it needs for as long as it needs.

We'll see what happens. I think, Putin, I don't think there's a way to save face. He's becoming a pariah. But, I think, he'll just ignore it or say that, well, we taught Ukrainians a lesson, now we are moving on to other things. I mean, maybe that's wishful thinking on my part, but I just don't see how he can regenerate in the conventional capability, and I don't see nuclear as an option.

So, I don't see where he's going, other than if his goal is just to create suffering and kill Ukrainians and destroy all of its buildings and infrastructure. Yes, then he might succeed.

**TIM NELSON:** Well, thanks Brian for that update. We'll visit again as developments warrant.

**BRIAN BONNER:** And I hope there's more great developments. It was great talking to you, Tim, and I really appreciate the fact that Minnesota Public Radio continues to take an interest in this war.

**CATHY**

That was NPR news reporter Tim Nelson speaking with Brian Bonner. Brian's a former journalist for the *St. Paul*

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