

INTELLIGENCE AND THE UKRAINE WAR: EARLY LESSONS AND RESEARCH ROADMAP

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Introduction

The Russian military invasion of Ukraine, in February 2022, presents the greatest challenge to European security since the end of the Cold War. Russia's intentions towards Ukraine became clear since the Russian annexation of part of Ukraine, especially the Crimea. Yet most policymakers in the West, and indeed intelligence analyst, were caught by surprise as Russian paratroopers jumped over Kiev's military airfields. In the weeks coming up to the Russian invasion, many experts argue that Russia will not invade Ukraine, for a variety of political, economic and moral reasons. The Russian surprise attack, and the ensuing strong Ukrainian defence and counter-attacks, present a new chapter in the study and understanding

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of intelligence. The Ukraine war presents Western intelligence services with new challenges and its intelligence lessons must be analysed, studied, and disseminated effectively.

The purpose of this article is to examine early lessons of the Ukraine war in the field of intelligence and map out a new research agenda which must be addressed by both intelligence scholars and analysts in order to implement changes needed in Western intelligence capabilities and priorities to meet the new threats from Russia. The Ukraine war broke many military axioms relating to Russia which were, for decades, accepted at face value. The combat abilities of the Russian army proved to be far below those attributed to it by Western intelligence analysis during the decades of the Cold War and much beyond. The same could be said about Russia logistics, and indeed fighting morale. The failure of the Russian invasion to secure its key objectives in the first days of the attack, and the ensuing war of attrition in eastern Ukraine, came as a surprise to those experts who foresaw a rapid collapse of Ukraine. Ukraine's political leadership, military resourcefulness and civilian courage more than a match to the invading Russian forces.

The strength of Ukrainian resistance against the invading forces surprised the world. The Russians, on the other side, were surprised not only by Ukrainian tenacity and fighting spirit but also by the firm political unity in the West. Russian President Putin expected Western disunity and political disagreements similar to the ones following the US invasion of Iraq two decades ago. However, the Russians were now faced with the US and the EU standing firmly together in their condemnation of the attack and in the coordination of a wide range of painful sanctions against Russia.

As such, all sides in the conflict were surprised by unforeseen events and developments in the early stages of the war and struggle to begin the process of changes and reforms necessary to address the vulnerabilities, both in their military and intelligence, exposed by the war. Intelligence lessons learned from the Ukraine war are essential for understanding future

intelligence challenges for European security in the coming years.

Surprise

Was the Russian invasion of Ukraine a surprise? The answer to this question is more complicated than a simple yes or no. On the one hand, Russian military preparations on the ground were made in plain view, without any attempt to seriously camouflage the scale and type of forces being assembled just across the Ukrainian borders. American and British intelligence services warned months in advance of the impending Russian attack. Russian rhetoric constantly emphasised that an attack would come. On the other hand, as late as mid-February 2022, numerous experts were explaining why the Russians would never invade Ukraine, basing their arguments on political, economic and even societal reasons.

Despite warnings and obvious signs on the ground, the invasion of Ukraine came as a major surprise to the top political decision-makers in the United States and in the European Union. In their turn, the Russian leadership was surprised by the effective and tenacious Ukrainian defence of their homeland and the inability of the Russian army to achieve its initial strategic targets. Both Western and Russian intelligence services had years to prepare for the eventuality of such a conflict, especially following the 2014 Russian annexation of the Crimea.

In his landmark study of surprise attacks, Richard Betts divides the reasons why surprise succeeds into two types: operational causes; and the 'Fog of Peace'. Operational causes include the failure of intelligence to provide effective warnings, the limits to predictability, and ways of circumventing deterrence¹. The 'fog of peace' includes problems of interpretation and reaction, rationality or irrationality of political and military decision-makers, intelligence and political risk-taking, and the issue of defensive surprise. All of these issues are

¹ Richard Betts (1982), *Surprise Attack*, The Brookings Institution, Washington DC.

relevant to analysing intelligence relating to the Ukraine war surprise. But even at this early stage it becomes progressively clearer that the failure to fully appreciate and analyse Russian military intentions to invade Ukraine lies less in the lack of intelligence collection and more in a biased analysis. This bias has its roots in the tremendous amount of prestige that the Russian army had during the Cold War. Images of the numerous and invincible Russian military clouded western intelligence from fully understanding the profound changes of recent years within Russian politics and society.

Disinformation

Undoubtedly the biggest disinformation success of the Russian military has been to create the impression of its own invincibility. During the Cold War, when NATO forces in Europe were at their peak, some estimates predicted that Russian forces invading Western Europe would reach the coast of the Atlantic within three weeks. Images of the mighty Russian army, with its endless columns of tanks and human wave attacks of World War II, echoed throughout Western military planning of the past half a century. Perceptions of Russia's enormous military strength were constantly reinforced by military parades, such as the annual May Day parade in Moscow, military exhibitions and other such events in which the most modern weapon systems were placed on display.

The legend of the enormous strength of the Russian Armed Forces undoubtedly influenced intelligence assessments before the outbreak of the Ukraine war. Even very experienced analysts maintain that the Ukraine Armed Forces could not hope to resist such a powerful invading force. Questions now must be asked about the weight given to the different components in such estimates in view of the Russian military failures. These failures may be attributable quite a number of causes, including lack of efficient command, numerical inferiority, tactical mistakes, major logistical problems, low fighting morale, and others. Any analysis of prewar intelligence estimates of Russian military capabilities must take into account the strong dissonance between the numerical strength of the Russian Armed Forces in all types of arms, on the one

side, and its meager actual performance in the battlefield, on the other. Perhaps the greatest intelligence bias impacting the overestimation of Russian military capabilities in Western prewar intelligence estimates was the success of Russian information warfare in creating the impression of their strength and invincibility.

Weakness of Russian Intelligence

A major weakness of Russian intelligence, at least during the early stages of the war, seems to be their inability to tell truth to power. When examining the performance of Russian intelligence during the war, there seem to be a distinct dissonance between capabilities, on the one hand and political and military impact, on the other. Russian intelligence seems to be very effective in collecting information on Ukraine and processing it, but did not appear able to make a marked impact on the political and the strategic military decision-making before and during the war.

Russian intelligence collection in and on Ukraine before the war was undoubtedly very good. Russian intelligence enjoyed the advantage of similar language, ease of movement across the borders and out of Ukraine, in the presence of Russia supporters within the Ukrainian population. Ukraine was an easy intelligence target for Russian intelligence right up to the outbreak of war. Not only could Russian intelligence operatives operate with impunity in Ukraine, but they could also glean much information on the Ukrainian military, especially on defensive capabilities and fortifications, from Russian officers who were previously station in Ukraine.

That being said, in an authoritarian regime like that headed by President Putin, intelligence heads face difficulties in presenting facts or estimates which contradict the prevailing political opinions. Precise information on Russian intelligence estimates over Ukrainian military capabilities and will to fight are not yet available, but more authoritative information on the performance of Russian intelligence in the war will becomes accessible over time. A central question will be only the role of intelligence in Russian military preparations and operations

but also the role of intelligence in political and strategic decision-making in Russia.

Captured Russian Military Hardware

During the fighting in the Ukraine, vast quantities of Russian military hardware were captured by the Ukrainian army. These captured weapons include everything from armor and vehicles of every type to missiles and launchers, electronic warfare systems, communication and encryption equipment, artillery and light weapons, to helicopters and aircraft shot down during the fighting. Many of these weapon systems are being thoroughly analysed by Ukrainian military intelligence and some may be provided for further analysis to friendly Western services as well.

The loss of all these systems represents a major setback for Russian military power, not only as battle losses but also because analysis of captured systems is used to discover the vulnerabilities of Russian weapons and design countermeasures and tactics to defeat them. Russian military technology captured in various wars has been the focus of extensive technological analysis efforts in the West. For example, Russian tanks and Missiles in the 1967 and the 1973 Middle East wars were thoroughly analysed in experiments conducted by Israeli military intelligence, the results of which were provided to friendly countries including the US, Britain and Germany². Russian military technology captured in Afghanistan in the 1980s was extensively explored by the US intelligence community and the results used for developing countermeasures and making Western weapon systems more effective.

One area of special interest in the evaluation of captured Russian military technology is that of electronic warfare. The growing digitalisation of battlefields and the increased importance of integrated military combat management systems make the threat of interception and disruption by electronic

² Shlomo Shpiro (2004), "Know Your Enemy: West German-Israeli Intelligence Evaluation of Soviet Weapon Systems", *Journal of Intelligence History*, Vol. 4 No. 1, Summer 2004, pp. 57-73.

warfare means more severe than ever before. The capture of Russian electronic warfare systems makes it possible to evaluate their capabilities more precisely, and modify current and future systems to resist such interference. Electronic warfare mobile battlefield systems, usually mounted on trucks, are considered among the most secret and sensitive systems deployed by any modern army. It is unclear why Russian army units did not destroy some of their electronic warfare vehicles when withdrawing, but it is one failure which may cost the Russians dearly as knowledge of the state-of-the-art Russian electronic warfare systems was until now quite limited.

Intelligence and War Crimes

The international prosecution of war crimes present intelligence services with unique challenges which go beyond their traditional roles in collection analysis and dissemination of information for national security. Ordinarily, intelligence work is conducted in secrecy and the product of this work remains confidential. Indeed, most intelligence output must remain secret for it to remain effective. However, in prosecuting war crimes information collected by intelligence services must be made public in open court. Moreover, not only does the information become public but intelligence services are often also called to explain the ways by which this information was obtained. The directors of intelligence services and their political masters are often at a dilemma whether to release information on war crimes at the risk of compromising sources and methods. This dilemma explains the frequent reluctance of some intelligence services in the past to fully cooperate with international tribunals investigating war crimes.

Since the mid-1990s, the international prosecution of war crimes became a priority for the international community, with efforts concentrated at the wars in the former Yugoslavia and later on conflicts in Africa. These activities included the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and the International Criminal Court (ICC) investigations in Sudan, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo and the

Central African Republic³. However, more recent years saw the erosion of war crimes enforcement on the international level. For example, use of chemical weapons in the Syrian civil war went unpunished. Despite clear evidence pointing to the use of chemical weapons in Syria, the international community failed to bring to justice those responsible for breaking one of the fundamental prohibitions of the international law of war.

The work of international tribunals and courts investigating war crimes is based on concepts of international law and require openness, accountability and clear rules of procedure. Many allegations of war crimes surfaced over the past months in Ukraine. These incidents require thorough investigation, only some of which can be conducted by Ukraine forces on the spot. The investigation of war crime abuses are not limited only to forensic evidence and witnesses at the scene of the alleged crimes but also involve wider issues such as military responsibility and political direction of such crimes. Western intelligence services possess some of the capabilities necessary for securing evidence of this type, including through the monitoring of communications and the collection of military and political information on a much wider scale relating to the conflict.

The Forgotten Art of Military Intelligence

The art of military intelligence is as old as warfare itself. During the Cold War, Western military intelligence concentrated on the capabilities, order of battle and plans of the enemy. Military intelligence played a major role within NATO and Western military posture against Soviet aggression.

However, following the end of the Cold War, much Western military intelligence capabilities fell victim to the ‘dividend of peace’ and reductions in defence budgets. Only were military intelligence organisations make smaller, but their concentration focus in the past two decades on counterterrorism

³ David Bosco (2014), *Rough Justice: The International Criminal Court in a World of Power Politics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

rather than on interstate war. The best people and the most sophisticated collection and analysis systems were allocated to the issue of countering radical Islamic terrorism⁴. Intelligence collection and analysis of large armies, in preparation for major interstate military conflicts, was all but neglected.

This neglect of the art of military intelligence was not only an institutional and organisational issue but also one of personnel. Intelligence officers who wanted to have a successful career chose to specialise in various aspects of counterterrorism. The ‘institutional memory’ of many Western intelligence services over Russia decline, as a whole generation of Cold War intelligence officers retired to be replaced by people who perceived terrorism to be the major long-term threat to Western security.

The weak state of military intelligence in the West was illustrated in analysis over the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war of 2020, fought between Azerbaijan and Armenia. This war turned out to be a proving ground for the testing of new operational concepts and weapon systems, both from Russia and the West. While Russia supported Armenia, Azerbaijan was using weapon systems from Turkey and Israel. The rapid Azeri military successes surprised Western analysts while also exposing the deficiencies of Russian armaments and tactics. While the Armed Forces of Azerbaijan were making full use of drones and guided munitions, the Armenians were fighting a traditional entrenched defensive war which could not stem the onslaught of precision weaponry. The large-scale effective use by Azerbaijan of attack drones gave them a strong military advantage over the Armenian forces. This war exposed not only Russian weakness in armaments but also in their perceptions, and preparations, of how a future war should be fought. For example, some years ago the Commander of the Russian Air Force was asked why Russia was lagging behind in the development of strike drones. His answer was “why do we need them? We have enough planes and

⁴ Javier Argomaniz et.al. (2016), *EU Counter-Terrorism and Intelligence: A Critical Assessment*, Routledge, New York.

pilots”⁵. The current Russian dependency on using Iranian attack drones in Ukraine clearly demonstrates that little has changed in the mindset of the Russian military leadership over this issue. However, the full strategic and tactical lessons of the second Nagorno-Karabakh war over Russian military power, or weakness thereof, were not fully explored nor disseminated enough within the Western intelligence community, thus contributing to the maintenance of perceptions over Russian military superiority.

Conclusions – Back to Intelligence Basics

It’s victory over Germany in 1945 gave the Russian military a very high level of prestige. Famous images of Russian soldiers trampling over Nazi flags in Berlin and climbing the Reichstag, with endless columns of Russian tanks in the background, created an indelible impression and a long lasting reputation of the Russian army’s tenaciousness and solid fighting skills. However, Russian victory in WWII came at huge costs, both in terms of manpower and material. The Russian army sustained huge losses and its logistics were strongly augmented by vast amounts of war supplies from the United States. Victory over Nazi Germany had a very strong impact on intelligence analysis over Russian military capabilities for many decades⁶.

However, both Russia and Europe changed dramatically since the end of the Cold War. These changes are not only technological but also political, economic and, very importantly, societal. European perceptions of the absence of a large-scale military threat to national and regional security, on the one hand, and the expanding threat of radical violent terrorism, on

⁵ Insights from the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict in 2020 (Part II), 29 March 2021, quoting Konstantin Marienko, deputy director of the Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies (CAST). <https://madscriblog.tradoc.army.mil/316-insights-from-the-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-in-2020-part-ii/>

⁶ Richard Overy (1998), *Russia’s War: A History of the Soviet Effort 1941-1945*, Penguin Books, New York.

the other, invariably meant a decline in the art of military intelligence. Warning bells from the wars in Georgia and in Nagorno-Karabakh did not suffice for European countries to reinvest in expanding their military intelligence capabilities. A major lesson from the Ukraine war is the need to relearn and retrain national intelligence services in the art of collection and evaluation of large-scale interstate military threats. This does mean a shift of some capacities from the field of counterterrorism to more traditional military threats.

Intelligence services and intelligence scholars need to focus on learning the intelligence lessons of the Ukraine war. This process will be slow, as we are still partially enveloped by the ‘fog of battle’ and the lack of sufficient and precise information beyond propaganda and speculation. But it is a necessary, indeed essential, challenge for NATO and for intelligence scholars overall if we are to prevent the next surprise, both in terms of a surprise attack and in terms of surprising performance in the battlefield. Some contend that the very basics of intelligence have not changed over the past 3000 years. Be that as it may, every new major conflict brings also new rules of the game in terms of intelligence, and these must be analysed, understood and disseminated to the younger generation of intelligence practitioners whose view of the world over the past two decades has been shaped by the global war on terrorism.

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