

## INTELLIGENCE AND THE UKRAINE WAR: A BRIEF REVIEW

Robert B. Murrett<sup>†</sup>

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has resulted in a remarkable series of intelligence advances, with lessons that have already impacted the intelligence profession, and implications that will be felt for years to come.

The first manifestation of the strong impact of intelligence matters in the war actually came about before the invasion commenced on February 24th. The U.S. and other allied nations made a deliberate choice to declassify considerable intelligence about Russian plans and intent to invade Ukraine well in advance of the onset of hostilities. CIA Director William Burns characterized the decision to release sensitive intelligence as “effective,” and has said that it was “carried out in a carefully calibrated way designed to protect intelligence sources.”<sup>1</sup> Specifically, these “[i]ntelligence disclosures set Russian President Vladimir Putin on his back foot, wondering who and what in his government had been penetrated so deeply by U.S. agencies, and made it more difficult for other countries to hide behind Putin’s lies and side with Russia.”<sup>2</sup> The aggregate release has been characterized as the most extensive release of sensitive intelligence since the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962,<sup>3</sup> and while it is difficult to compare impact from such different circumstances, it was certainly aggressive.

The logic behind the dramatic release of intelligence on Russian plans to invade was also compelling. It was done in an attempt to stop the Russians from conducting the invasion in the first place by demonstrating that their plans had been compromised, and to immediately

---

<sup>†</sup> Robert Murrett is a Professor of Practice on the faculty of the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University, and serves as the Deputy Director of the Institute Security Policy and Law (SPL) at the University. Previously, Murrett was a career intelligence officer in the U.S. Navy, serving in assignments throughout the Pacific, Europe, and the Middle East through his thirty-four years of duty, retiring in the grade of Vice Admiral.

1. Dan De Luce, *CIA Director Defends Declassifying Intel to Expose Russia’s Actions in Ukraine*, NBC NEWS (Sept. 8, 2022, 2:12 PM), <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/cia-director-burns-defends-declassifying-intel-expose-russias-actions-rcna46876>.

2. Amy Zegart, *Open Secrets: Ukraine and the Next Intelligence Revolution*, FOREIGN AFFS. (Dec. 20, 2022), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/world/open-secrets-ukraine-intelligence-revolution-amy-zegart>.

3. *See id.*

increase opposition to the planned invasion by many nations around the globe. While it did not stop the onset of hostilities, it did serve as the first indicator that Russian military activity would be hamstrung by a lack of operational security throughout the conflict. It also set the conditions for follow-on international resistance and sanctions, as the U.S. used the intelligence to advance concern to European allies, NATO and members of Congress.<sup>4</sup> In the words of Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines, “by sharing intelligence and analysis regarding Putin’s plans or possible invasion, we were able to set the stage for our diplomats and policymakers to discuss what should be done in response and ultimately, to prepare for the coordinated effective response that was launched across dozens of countries.”<sup>5</sup>

On the opposite side of the equation, it became blatantly obvious upon the onset of hostilities that the Russian leadership had a profound lack of their own strategic intelligence on the likelihood of Ukrainian resistance to the invasion. This has been accurately characterized as reflecting “collective weaknesses within Russian collection, analysis and decision-making.”<sup>6</sup> In any event, it constituted a baffling lack of awareness with regard to the Ukrainian people. Estimates were derived in part from engaging with small numbers of pro-Russian Ukrainians “who agreed that their country was ripe for conquest and would fall without serious fighting,” representing a profound failure of collection and analysis—and apparently, blunt delivery of unwelcome intelligence to decision-makers.<sup>7</sup>

The second major intelligence failure at the strategic level was Moscow’s expectation that the NATO Alliance, the European Union, the G7, and other nations would stand idly by as the invasion unfolded. Even a modest level of awareness, appreciation, and basic intelligence collection in western capitals would have provided a good sense of the strong potential for resistance, diplomatic isolation, and severe economic sanctions that were to ensue. On the other side of this equation,

---

4. CONG. RSCH. SERVS., *RUSSIA’S WAR IN UKRAINE: MILITARY AND INTELLIGENCE ASPECTS* (2023).

5. Summer Myatt, *DNI Avril Haines Shares Lessons Learned From Ukraine & Thoughts on New National Security Strategy*, GOVCON WIRE (Oct. 18, 2022), <https://www.govconwire.com/2022/10/dni-avril-haines-lessons-from-ukraine-and-thoughts-on-national-security-strategy/>.

6. Neveen Shaaban Abdalla et. al., *War on the Rocks: Intelligence and the War in Ukraine: Part 2*, TEX. NAT’L SEC. REV. (May 19, 2022), <https://warontherocks.com/2022/05/intelligence-and-the-war-in-ukraine-part-2/>.

7. *Making Sense of Vladimir Putin’s War*, THE ECONOMIST (Dec. 23, 2022), <https://www.economist.com/europe/2022/12/23/making-sense-of-vladimir-putins-war>.

western intelligence services' conviction and accurate assessment that the Russian invasion was going to happen allowed the U.S. and allies to conduct talks in December 2021 to set the ground for "massive consequences and severe costs" for Moscow well in advance.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to this lack of a strategic grasp prior to the invasion, it became clear after February 24th that Russia had a profound lack of intelligence at the *operational* level on the military capabilities and readiness of the Ukrainian armed forces. The Ukrainian military contested on the ground, in the air and at sea, and Russian forces sustained extensive losses across their joint force, particularly in the initial stages.<sup>9</sup> Another operational shortcoming that deserves mention is the considerable intelligence collection and targeting success of the Ukrainian forces enabled by the poor operational security of Russian troops at all levels. This has allowed the Ukrainian forces to exploit a raft of sources, including pervasive use of unencrypted communications by Russian troops—leading to consistent and effective attacks on high-value targets which continues through the present day.

As the conflict continued through the spring and summer, and as Russian forces withdrew from areas north and northeast of Kyiv, it became clear that the Ukrainian military and intelligence agencies were able to leverage a wide array of capabilities to provide crucial advantages to their forces. Aside from intelligence from western allies, they have made extensive use of commercial imagery and "open source" from local social media reflecting the home field advantage of defending their own country.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, resistance operations and intelligence provided by loyal Ukrainians in areas under Russian occupation have been vital, as we have seen throughout the conflict.<sup>11</sup>

With this as background, and as the war enters its second year, we should acknowledge that there are intelligence lessons from the conflict that have implications well beyond Ukraine. First, pervasive open-source intelligence is a game changer, particularly when

---

8. David Ignatius, *The Secret Planning That Kept the White House a Step Ahead of Russia*, WASH. POST (May 26, 2022, 4:32 PM), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/05/26/biden-white-house-secret-planning-helped-ukraine-counter-russia/?utm\\_source=twitter&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_campaign=wp\\_opinions](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/05/26/biden-white-house-secret-planning-helped-ukraine-counter-russia/?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=wp_opinions).

9. See CONG. RSCH. SERV., RUSSIA'S WAR IN UKRAINE: MILITARY AND INTELLIGENCE ASPECTS (2023) (available at <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R4706>).

10. See Abdalla, *supra* note 6.

11. See Andrew E. Kramer, *Behind Enemy Lines, Ukrainians Tell Russians 'You are Never Safe'*, N.Y. TIMES (Aug. 17, 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/17/world/europe/ukraine-partisans-insurgency-russia.html>.

combatants on both sides are enabled with personal devices, augmented by other means of direct access to the internet. In addition to widespread and timely dissemination of content, this technology has strong implications for operational security, and for transparency regarding formerly hidden activities—such as war crimes. Additionally, widely accessible, space-based commercial imagery collection and dissemination dramatically narrows the secure space for any military operation, not in the least because it can be openly displayed and analyzed by a wide range of public and private actors, including media outlets.

Another lesson from the Ukraine war is that intelligence relationships matter. The vigorous intelligence exchange between Ukraine and allied partners have been noteworthy and continues to have a clear impact on Ukrainian decision-making and combat operations. Defense Intelligence Agency Director Lt. Gen. Scott Berrier has described the intelligence sharing as “revolutionary in terms of what we can do,” and NSA/Cyber Command Commander General Paul Nakasone has stated that he has “never seen a better sharing of accurate, timely and actionable intelligence” in his thirty-five years of service.<sup>12</sup>

For the long term, intelligence estimates of Russia’s *actual* posture with regard to negotiations will take on even more importance for the duration of the war. While we can measure the level of support from nations allied with Ukraine with some accuracy from open media sources, it will be critical to have a precise understanding of the Kremlin’s posture with regard to eventual negotiations, and to have accurate intelligence assessments of Russia’s perceived or actual vulnerabilities (for example, impact of certain economic sanctions). Such insights could eventually contribute to Putin and his circle giving up their “imperial dream of controlling Ukraine.”<sup>13</sup> While there is evidence that the Russian leadership may now have a more accurate picture of actual reversals and costs of the war in Ukraine, the U.S. Director of National Intelligence recently stated that “it’s still not clear to us at this stage

---

12. John Grady, *Intel Sharing Between U.S. and Ukraine ‘Revolutionary’ Says DIA Director*, U.S. NAVAL INST. NEWS (Mar. 18, 2022, 2:28 PM), <https://news.usni.org/2022/03/18/intel-sharing-between-u-s-and-ukraine-revolutionary-says-dia-director>.

13. See Ivo H. Daalder & James Goldgeier, *The Long War in Ukraine: The West Needs to Plan for a Protracted Conflict with Russia*, FOREIGN AFFS. (Jan. 9, 2023), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/long-war-ukraine-russia-protracted-conflict>.

2023]

**Intelligence and the Ukraine War**

533

that [Putin] has a full picture of just how challenged they are.”<sup>14</sup> Moreover, other reporting suggests that public support for the war in Ukraine is “falling significantly” and could result in a lack of “even tacit approval of the war amongst the population.”<sup>15</sup> While Putin and his inner circle are taking strong measures to suppress dissent (along with Alexander Lukashenko and his fragile government in Minsk), misgivings by the Russian population and elites are very real. For these and other reasons, accurate intelligence regarding Russian public opinion and the current inner workings of the Kremlin will be critical to support whatever negotiations take place in the months ahead.

---

14. Jamey Keaten & Nomaan Merchant, *U.S. Intel Chief Thinking ‘Optimistically’ for Ukraine Forces*, AP (Dec. 4, 2022), <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-putin-europe-business-avril-haines-b7e15fcb84ba5962a7b63c0f05fdedfd>.

15. Adam Schrader, *British Intelligence Shows Public Support for War in Ukraine Falling in Russia*, UNITED PRESS INT’L (Dec. 4, 2022, 11:57 AM), [https://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/World-News/2022/12/04/british-intelligence-shows-public-support-war-ukraine-falling-russia/3591670170944/](https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2022/12/04/british-intelligence-shows-public-support-war-ukraine-falling-russia/3591670170944/).