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# UKRAINE – EARLY LESSONS OR TOO EARLY TO TELL?

**I**N THE early 1970s Henry Kissinger is said to have asked the then Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai his opinion on the effects that the French Revolution had had on modern European and international politics and statecraft. Zhou is said to have replied “I think that it is rather too early to tell!”. Armies, and the British Army is certainly no exception, have a chequered record in the speed and efficiency with which they observe, learn and implement lessons. Tactical lessons tend to be rapidly observed and quickly trained into the tactics, techniques and procedures of those about to deploy on operations. Strategic, doctrinal, capability and procurement lessons have a habit of taking rather longer to turn from observation

into implementation. The pressures and temptations to become so absorbed in the tyranny of today’s problems have a tendency to prevent us from properly preparing for tomorrow’s.

During the first week of the Russian invasion of Ukraine I was very struck by the volume of comment, often very well-informed comment, that rushed to observe that the trends of the last few years, in terms of Defence spending and capability, were flawed. The Integrated Review needed to be re-thought, they opined. Tanks remained the key decider on the battlefield. Numbers mattered, and the repeated cutting of Army numbers, in particular, had to be reversed. Modern tactical doctrine paid too much heed to recent experience,

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and insufficient heed to long experience. Not all of those who made their forceful points were right, nor were they all wrong. Perhaps their mistake was, as I am doing in this article, in rushing to judge. In many ways it is, of course, ‘too early to tell’ what Ukraine might mean for us all. Yet, as an observer of both current events and of our own Army, I would remark that the fight in Ukraine, even after such a short time, has thrown up some very apposite lessons – or perhaps they are just reminders – that should prompt us to move away from Zhou Enlai’s timescales and into a rather more urgent frame of mind. Laid out on the pages that follow are those that I think most starkly spring to mind and that I hope may stand the test of time as the awful conflict in Ukraine continues to evolve.

## THE MORAL COMPONENT

Napoleon famously observed that: “the moral is to the physical as three is to one”. We all know that the moral component of fighting power is important. The British Army puts great stock by its moral component – fighting ethos; the ‘regimental system’; leadership, especially junior leadership; mission command; et al. Yet, if you look at our estimate processes, we pay lip service to our examination of the morale, motivation, stoicism and determination to prevail over our opponents, and, equally, of ourselves. It’s hard to measure, and hard to assess – so we tend to brush over it. So, here are just three enduring big markers to look out for that could help us to take this vital part of our estimate rather more seriously:

- **Troops with their backs against the wall have only two options – fight or fold. Those with everything to lose if they fold have a tendency to fight. Push people into a corner and the strength of their resistance, and the lengths to which they will go, should not surprise us. Most of the analysts (not just the ‘overconfident Russians’) were surprised by the strength and vehemence of Ukrainian resistance. Why would we be surprised by what the history of warfare tells us is ‘the Clausewitzian nature of war’ – and thus is the occurrence of the predictable?**

- History also tells us that leaders, particularly hard-to-



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remove autocrats, also tend to fight harder, to double down, when they are forced into corners. This is a different kind of ‘moral component action’, but, nevertheless, can lead to the taking of increasingly extreme measures to achieve goals that can be used to support the pressured autocrat in their own personal survival or domestic standing.

- **Clarity of purpose (“I know exactly what I am fighting for”) has proved repeatedly to be a very strong pillar of the moral component. Existential threats aside, what emphasis is placed in your army (or your enemy’s army) upon generating a cohesive, unifying and compelling narrative as a military principle?**

Have a think about what that means for Ukrainians, angry and fighting both for their own survival and for that of their increasingly besieged or refugee families, compared to the young conscript Russians who thought that they were going on exercise. Have a think about what that means for President Putin if he too finds himself pushed deeper into the corner of an existential cage. Then pause to have a think, also, about your own Army – are you good at: unity of purpose; the strategic ‘in order to’; and the garnering and nurturing of public support for your operations (as opposed to support for your service)? How hard do you analyse the building blocks of your own moral component – in peace and in preparation for war or

operations? Or do you take it for granted because you simply ‘know that you are better than the other guy’? Do your operational and tactical estimate processes put enough (or, indeed, any) effort into evaluating your own and your opponents’ moral components? If Napoleon was right, why wouldn’t you want to understand, build and exploit a three-to-one force multiplier? What can you do, now, to improve in all of those areas?

## LOGISTICS AND OPERATIONAL MANOEUVRE AND MOVEMENT

One of those things that underpins that moral component of fighting power is the logistic support that sits as an integral part of the physical component. As that great US general Omar Bradley observed: “Amateurs talk tactics; professionals talk logistics”. Both Napoleon and Frederick The Great have been credited with the quote that “an army marches on its stomach”. The point is, that armies have a habit of misplaced elitism and snobbery – regarding the so-called ‘teeth arms’, or the fighting soldiers, as a cut above the rest; of concentrating on working out how they are to fight the battle, instead of how they are going to sustain the fight. This leads to those who support the fighting soldiers – with food, clothing, ammunition, spare parts, medical services, transport, you-name-it – being treated as of secondary importance, or even as an afterthought.

A cold and hungry army has low morale, which is reflected in



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its fighting performance; and a foraging army neglects its fighting tasks. An army that is low on fuel doesn't move far or fast. An army that is low on ammunition doesn't have the wherewithal to fight. An army with rotten tyres grinds to a halt.

Defence analysts find it relatively easy to count numbers – of tanks, aircraft, AFVs, artillery pieces, etc. Defence analysts find it relatively hard to assess the readiness or battle-worthiness of those countable equipments. Defence analysts rarely conduct assessments of nations' logistic capabilities as a basic measure of comparison with other nations' military forces. *Professional military analysts* should not fall into the same trap.

Furthermore, years away from Cold War continental planning have lulled western armies into forgetting that, throughout the 1960s, 70s and 80s, road movement was a highly practiced art that sat in the G3 and J3, and in G5 and J5, worlds. Operational movement is not a function of Logistics. Generations of G3 and G5 staff officers spent their time calculating pass times, orders of march, route density, parallel movement on multiple routes, rates of advance, control lines, bridge classifications, obstacle plans, wet and dry gap-crossing capabilities, 'going traces', and all of the other dark arts of the skill of moving large formations of troops and of wheeled and tracked vehicles across the ground – opposed or unopposed. Every staff college in NATO put great effort into teaching the skill. Every formation, battlegroup and unit staff practised the skill; every unit practised the reality. We have watched in Ukraine what it means to have neglected the complimentary G4 and G3/5 arts of Logistics and of Operational Movement. Are we guilty of the same neglect of these arts? If not, how are we different? If so, what are we going to do to put this right?



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**HEARTS AND MINDS**

We believe, in our various doctrines, that ‘hearts and minds’ matter. We want people to be on our side – our own people, neutral people, and our enemies’ people. It makes sense, both morally and practically, to make this so. We believe that we have a better chance of prevailing in war if this is so. And, in addition, the rules of war tell us that collateral damage, to use that unpleasant euphemism, be it in the destruction of property or of people, is beyond the pale. I do not need to re-rehearse our views, our laws, or our doctrine in this respect – they are all familiar to us, either as military professionals, as commentators or reporters, or, even, just as citizens. But, just because we accept these things as ‘doctrinal

givens’, does not mean that we should ascribe them to our opponents.

Russia has shown, throughout its long history, in and out of conflict, that it places a different measure entirely upon the hearts and minds, and, indeed bodies and souls, of its own people and of its opponents’ people. Many of our other opponents, recent, current or latent, hold very different views from us on the rules and norms surrounding civilian populations. Russia understands the need to maintain its own strategic centre of gravity in terms of the control of the predominant mood of its people. Its people must be compliant – and it does not matter whether that compliance is achieved through persuasion or coercion

– whatever works will do. Russia understands that the suffering of others’ people leads to often unendurable pressure upon the decision-making leaders of those people. Decency, rules, compassion, laws: to the West these are virtues to be respected even in extreme adversity. To the Russian strategist they are weaknesses and restrictions upon their opponents that may be used or manipulated. To one side non-combatants are inviolable; to the other they are simply more exploitable tools in the toolbox of war.

While the temptation must always be to judge others (and, where apt, to condemn them) by our standards, the practical demands of the operational planner mean that we should first strive to understand others by their own standards. If we first understand others, we may be better armed and better prepared to face them. By better understanding our opponents we have a better chance of prevailing against them. And history tells us that the winners also tend to be the judges. So: let us first prevail. Only by prevailing can we hope for our judgement to have effect.

**TACTICAL AND CAPABILITY RE-THINKS**

As I stated in my opening remarks, the first week of the Russian invasion of Ukraine saw a rush of capability, procurement and tactical comment from a range of observers, from the most respected Defence analysts, think-tanks and retired generals, to the most ill-informed of observers or commentators. Some of those judgements were wise, and some have proved to be rather hasty. At this, still early, stage I would make the following in terms of doctrinal, tactical or capability observations.

**Urban Warfare.** We are right to emphasise the importance of urban warfare. We are right to demand that we should be able to fight and prevail in the urban landscape. We are right, by our rules and standards, to

state that towns and cities have become too big to be ‘besieged’ in the medieval sense. We are right to ponder upon how we can use the urban environment as a hinterland in which we can manoeuvre, exploit, target, isolate and use the city’s ‘vital organs’ to best effect, without trying to occupy or engulf the entire urban sprawl. But, as the BBC reporter Quentin Sommerville recently so pithily and pointedly observed as he walked through the ruins of Kharkiv – if you think that our Russian opponents subscribe to the same views in this respect, and that their current tactics in the Ukrainian urban environment are a surprise, then you simply haven’t been paying attention! Whether in Chechnya, Georgia or Syria (or in a string of Russian, Polish and German towns and cities in World War Two; or, indeed, in their own towns and cities, including Moscow, in the face of the advancing Grande Armée of Napoleon) Russia has a track-record in urban warfare. Like all armies, the Russian Army understands that towns and cities are important objectives, but also that the urban fight can quickly become a huge drain on manpower and materiel. Russia’s answer to that conundrum has repeatedly been to trap civilian populations in cities and inflict upon them suffering at range: to besiege and bombard. This tactic risks little from a Russian perspective and puts great pressure on the decision-makers of its opponents (see my comments above on the moral component of fighting power and strategic centres of gravity). The British Army’s very timely re-think of urban warfare must think hard not only about how we may wish to approach the dilemma of the 21st Century urban fight, but also how we may wish to counter our opponents’, often very different, approach to the same problem. We must be able to do both if we are to succeed in this environment.

**Artillery and Counter-artillery.** The Russians have shown, yet again, that they believe that



The scars of urban warfare: Rescue operations following rocket attacks on the building of the Security Service of Ukraine in Kharkiv (2 March 2022). Photo by Fotoreserg

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artillery, whether in intimate support or delivered at great distance, is a battle-winner. They believe in its use in volume and variety across the battlespace, and both with pinpoint accuracy when required and with frighteningly indiscriminate abandon at other times. Objectives, both military and civilian, are all seen as targets for artillery. In peacetime NATO’s armies have had a track-record of reducing their artillery. In wartime Britain has a track-record of hastily

rebuilding her artillery. I am struck, therefore by two things in this respect. Firstly, we would do well to have a very sound plan for the rapid acquisition of a much larger artillery capability (and that includes skilled gunners) in the event that we are required to engage in war at scale; certainly larger than our current capacity for capability-building in this respect allows. Secondly, we would do well to build our counter-artillery capability in all of its aspects – detection, tracking, targeting

and destruction. This will need to consider a wide range of capabilities, from the simplest of drones to the most complex of long-range warheads.

**Tanks and Anti-tank.** Tanks still matter. And, because they matter, an anti-tank capability matters too. The NLAW and Javelin [pictured below] have been used to great effect in Ukraine. Tanks concentrated, especially for operational movement, are vulnerable. Tanks dispersed, perhaps more dispersed than we have become used to, may offer more utility than we have previously supposed. But when tanks are dispersed, they are vulnerable unless they are part of an intimate, trained, familiar, all-arms team. And yet history has repeatedly shown that the shock action of concentrated armour (from the Scythian and Parthian Cataphracts, to Napoleon’s Cuirassiers, to the massed T34s on the fields of Kursk) has battle-winning effect. Nevertheless, the long-held mantra that sees the penny-packeting of tanks as a tactical faux-pas may need a heretical re-examination. So, I do not believe that tanks are at a ‘horse and tank moment’. But I do believe that we are long overdue a hard think about how we organise, group, train and fight the tank and anti-tank battle in an all-arms setting.

**Air and Air Defence.** Every



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modern soldier knows that fighting under a blanket of air superiority makes one's job much easier. Air parity is the basic minimum to be hoped for. Labouring against the tide of an enemy's dominance of the air makes life increasingly hard. The fact that the President of Ukraine has made the plea for help to counter Russian airpower the core of his cries for military support should serve as a stark reminder to those who have forgotten or neglected this truism of modern war. There is little doubt that the UK, and, indeed, NATO in general, has paid insufficient attention over an increasing number of years to its armies' abilities to contribute meaningfully to the battle to secure the air above themselves. Of all of the pressing lessons from Ukraine the need to give urgent attention to the intimate air defence of our armies must, surely, sit high on our 'to do' lists. Every infantry battalion has an anti-tank platoon. Have we spotted that every Ukrainian infantry battalion is also crying out for an anti-air platoon? From the operational-level shield, to sub-unit close protection, this aspect of our capability-set would benefit from a very rapid re-think.

### ***The 'Sub-Threshold' Focus.***

Finally, in this respect, focussed small-scale international training and support missions, and the so-called 'sub-threshold' focus of the Integrated Review, came in for a hammering by those who pointed out that large-scale, 'heavy-metal' warfighting was an increasingly neglected art that had, once again, been shown to be a vital national capability that was neglected at peril. Yet, surely, the point is that this has not been a confirmation that one is more important than the other, but that both matter? Ukraine could not stand up to Russia in 2014 when the Crimea was invaded. Britain, and others, consequently put in a considerable 'sub-threshold training and support' effort. This, along with the moral component aspect discussed above, has doubtless done much to help Ukraine to resist in the valiant and effective way that it has. It has doubtless done much to help to thwart an expansionist Russia with scant regard for the rules-based world order that Britain seeks to preserve for advantage. The message of the IR is reinforced by this fact alone. But, at the same time, the need to be capable (both in terms of equipment capabilities, but also in terms of training and mindsets) of delivering war-

at-scale effectiveness has also been reinforced. Neglecting one capability set in favour of another is a real 'Sophie's Choice' that no 21st Century British Army that seeks to serve the need to be able to protect the people and interests of Britain, at home and abroad, should be asked to make. A responsible Army must be able to do both, and a responsible nation should enable it so to do.

### **STRATEGIC UNITY MATTERS: DIVISION IS POWERFUL**

Finally, at the strategic level, it must be worth observing that our opponents have relied, strategically, upon the divisions that inevitably emerge within and between democracies in order to further their own agendas. Democratic politicians must dispute with each other to win the votes of their polities. National governments must balance their nations' interests against those of other nations (friends, allies, opponents and enemies alike) in order best to service the needs of their own people (and to enhance their own chances of re-election). These eternal truths of democratic governance mean that divisions of interest are inevitable. These divisions are exploitable by a ruthless opponent. Where statesmen and stateswomen are so inwardly focussed on matters

of personal or party interest, or upon national as opposed to collective interest, the exploiter's task becomes, at worst, easier and, at best, done for them. Of all of the immediate, powerful and self-evident lessons of the opening months of 2022 let us hope that our statesmen and stateswomen have grasped the 'unity of purpose and effect' lesson with a grip so tight that it is not loosened the moment that more pressing personal, party or national demands come in to play.

### **CONCLUDING THOUGHT**

For sure, it is premature to suggest that we can already see the full range of insights and lessons that Ukraine will have to offer. The conflict still has a long way to play out. But if we understand the nature of war, and the nature and character of the protagonists of war (each unique and varied according to their contexts) we have a much better chance of preparing well for future challenges. If nothing else, the shock of an armed invasion on the edge of Europe has given cause for assumptions and complacencies to be put aside and for thinking caps, of all shapes and sizes, to be donned. So: it may or may not be too early to tell, but it's certainly not too early to think.

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