'WEAPONISING THE TRUTH': UK INTELLIGENCE, PUBLIC INFORMATION AND UKRAINE

Inset: Kremlin.ru

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SPEAKING to the Australian National University, on 31st March 2022, the Director of the UK's Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), Sir Jeremy Fleming, talked about the changing nature of international security. The speech, marking the 75th anniversary of Australia's signals intelligence agency, the Australian Signals Directorate, also addressed the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Sir Jeremy said Vladimir Putin had made a 'strategic miscalculation' and that his inner circle was afraid to tell truth to power. Russia had overestimated its military capabilities and, he said, there was evidence that Russian troops – short on morale and equipment – were 'refusing to carry out orders, sabotaging their own equipment and even accidentally shooting down their own aircraft'.

The speech was the latest example of UK government messaging concerning the Ukraine crisis that explicitly drew on secret intelligence, paralleling developments on the US. The release of previously secret information to counter Russian disinformation, challenge narratives, and tell the story of the ground war has been extensive, a point Fleming acknowledged. 'It is already a remarkable feature of this conflict just how much intelligence has been so quickly declassified to get ahead of Putin's actions,' he said. 'In my view, intelligence is only worth collecting if we use it, so I unreservedly welcome this development.' The move by intelligence agencies beyond the internal provision of assessments for government to explicit public statements based on intelligence is a fascinating aspect of the Russia-Ukraine war, and has important implications for the use of intelligence in future.

RELEASING INTELLIGENCE

Sir Jeremy's statement is important as part of the recent trend to make public what would in the past have been secret. Previously, the release of intelligence was a rarity, often given great journalistic fanfare; the release of Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC)assessments as part of the Iraq 'September Dossier' in autumn 2002 is a notable example, and one that casts a long shadow even today. The JIC's assessments on Syrian use of chemical weapons were also made available in August 2013, and the intelligence case formed the cornerstone of the UK response to the Salisbury poisonings in 2018. Nonetheless, the release of intelligence before, and during, the current Ukraine crisis is unprecedented in scale and scope.

It should also be added that this is not just a UK trend. On the other side of the Atlantic, US officials and the Biden administration have been at the forefront of the 'prebuttal' strategy – the attempt to call

out Russian moves through the declassification of intelligence. As early as December 2021, following a visit by CIA Director Bill Burns to Moscow, US officials told the *Washington Post* that Russia was planning 'a military offensive against Ukraine as soon as early-2022'. Officials added, 'the plans involve extensive movement of 100 battalion tactical groups with an estimated 175,000 personnel, along with armor [sic], artillery and equipment'. The following month, the US said intelligence had revealed that Russia had sent saboteurs into eastern Ukraine to stage false flag operations, and that Russia's intelligence agencies had been active in recruiting current, and former, Ukrainian officials as part of a plot to remove the Zelensky government. Just days before the invasion, President Biden said he was 'convinced' Russia had decided to attack: 'Every indication we have is they're prepared to go into Ukraine.'

In the US, a leading advocate of declassifying intelligence to counter Moscow's narratives has been Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines. 'That was a real stroke of genius to deal with the disinformation', an unnamed European official recently told *The Financial Times*. The aggressive sharing of intelligence with allies, and in public, has been part of an effort to learn from the Kremlin's playbook[1] following the 2014 annexation of the Crimea, when Western governments were caught out by the sudden deployment of the now infamous 'little green men'. Providing a counter-narrative to Russian misinformation and giving updates on the war in Ukraine are now all part of the West's toolkit. Whereas in 2014 Western officials appeared stunned by Russian moves, the aim before Russia's recent invasion was to remove the element of surprise.

Smart building: Government Communications Headquarters Credit: Crown copyright

A UK APPROACH?

The speech by Sir Jeremy was the latest in a long line of UK intelligence disclosures. In January 2022, UK Foreign Secretary Liz Truss had issued a statement on Moscow's plans to install a pro-Kremlin leadership in Kyiv, mirroring statements from Washington. Downing Street had also intended to continue to declassify 'compelling intelligence', exposing 'Russian 'cyber-attacks, false flag operations or disinformation', and the UK's National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC), a part of GCHQ, has been at the forefront in the cyber domain. NCSC's consumer-led approach to intelligence, effectively releasing warnings and providing regular updates, has shown what can be done with secret intelligence in the public sphere, for example, revealing the activities of Russia's Main Intelligence Directorate, or GRU, against Ukraine's banking sector, and Federal Security Service (FSB) activities in cyberspace.

Given the military nature of the Ukrainian crisis, it is only natural that the UK's Defence Intelligence (DI), and the Chief of Defence Intelligence (CDI), Lieutenant General Sir Jim Hockenhull, have taken the lead. DI, which has often been overshadowed by the UK's civilian agencies, has taken a central role, before and during the crisis, using its specialist position to generate 'impact'. For DI, the all-source intelligence assessment arm of the Ministry of Defence, the move from providing intelligence to the ministry and wider UK government to influencing through the public sharing of intelligence has been a journey. In his first ever media briefing, in September 2020, Lt. Gen. Hockenhull warned that rival states had been 'supercharging more traditional techniques of influence and leverage'.

Though much remains unknown, DI – working with partners across NATO – was able to build up a detailed picture of Russian military build-up and, crucially, to make an informed assessment of the logistic support needed for a full-scale attack. Usually, such assessments would have remained behind closed doors. Instead, both DI leadership and Secretary of State for Defence, Ben Wallace, pushed for intelligence to go public.

GOING PUBLIC

Responding to Russian reports they were withdrawing forces in mid-February, Lt. Gen. Hockenhull told journalists, in a series of briefings, on 16th February: 'We have not seen evidence that Russia has withdrawn forces from Ukraine's borders. Contrary to their claims, Russia continues to build up military capabilities near Ukraine'. He added, 'This includes sightings of additional armoured vehicles, helicopters and a field hospital moving towards Ukraine's borders. Russia has the military mass in place to conduct an invasion'. The next day, in the first intelligence update, Ministry of Defence social media added there was 'no evidence' that Russia had withdrawn its forces. 'Russia retains a significant military presence', it added, 'that can conduct an invasion without further warning'.

Later in the day, the Ministry of Defence released an extraordinary video summarising the latest Russian build-up, including a map of likely Russian movements. In the video, DI assessed an 'abnormal' build-up of Russian forces – the largest since the breakup of the Soviet Union and far exceeding the

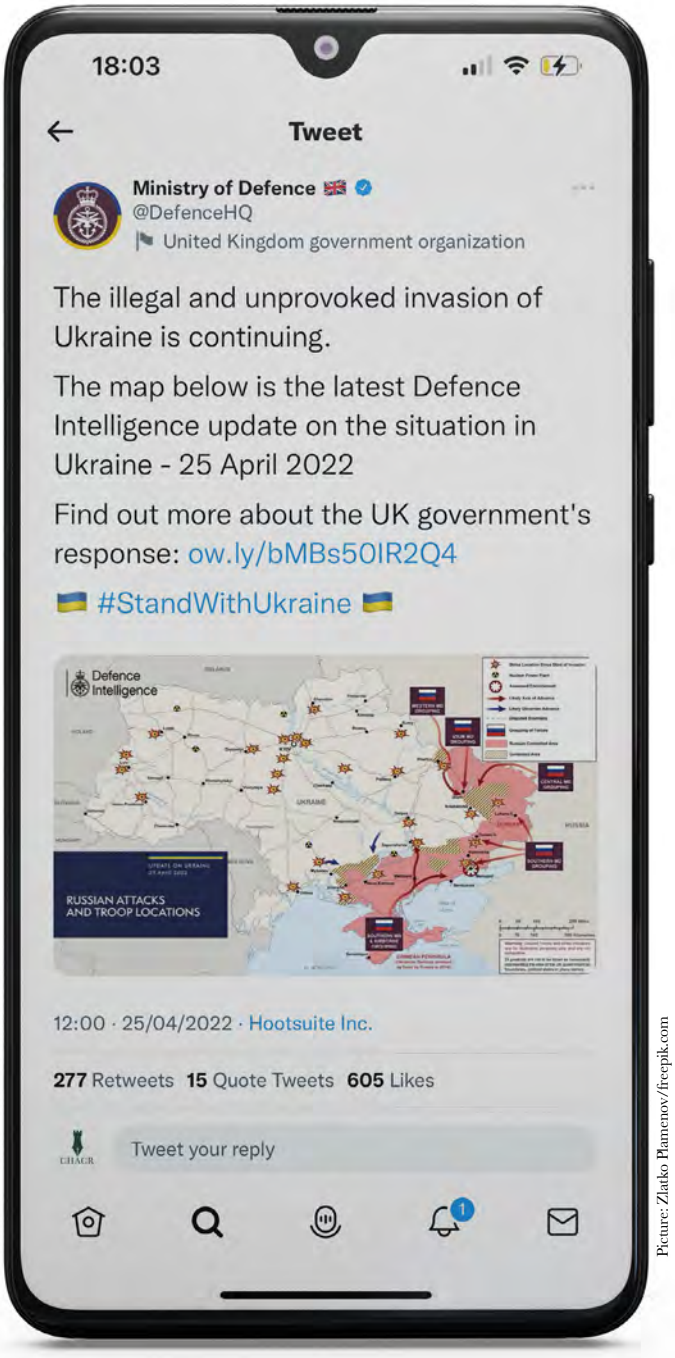
[1] *Read Mark Galeotti, The Weaponisation of Everything (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022).*

numbers needed for exercises. In a map that was remarkably accurate in predicting Russia's actual moves, DI anticipated a move from Belarus aimed at Kyiv, moves from the annexed Crimea into the Kherson region, supporting drives from Southwestern Russia into Donets. Additionally, intelligence revealed 'abnormal Russian naval activity' in the North Atlantic, Baltic and Mediterranean. The video, now viewed over 90,000 times, added Putin was 'willing to sustain thousands of casualties to get what he wants', yet added that he could 'still choose peace. He can choose diplomacy to de-escalate tensions. He can choose to prevent conflict'.

Beyond DI updates, intelligence was also placed front and centre by the Secretary of State. In January, Wallace had already warned MPs that the configuration and size of Russia's military near Ukraine indicated a multi-axis invasion. Moreover, though not mentioning intelligence itself, Wallace added: 'we have observed hardening Russian rhetoric, heightened cyber activity and widespread disinformation that could serve to provide false pretext for a Russian military intervention'. Just days before the Russian assault, the Secretary of State updated Parliament that Russia had deployed over 110 tactical groups – estimated to be 65% of Russia's land combat power – and was engaged in a concerted deception effort, including false flag activity, propaganda and Kremlin media carrying false stories.

PREBUTTAL

The release of information on Russia's military build-up was part of a rethink in how intelligence was used. Traditionally, DI had analysed and disseminated intelligence within government to further national and military decision-making. This traditional model, while applicable to Cold War era threats, was seen as outdated, and officials and Ministers recognised the need to release intelligence as part of UK and allied information activity. As the 2021 *Global Britain in a Competitive Age* acknowledged, nation states – namely, Russia, Iran and North Korea – were increasingly assertive in undermining UK interests, citing disinformation as just one of the tools of 'coercion and interference can also be used in "hybrid" combination with more traditional hard power methods'. Responding to so-called 'grey zone' activities, DI would 'become more agile in exploiting its knowledge for impact and effect'.[2]



Picture: Zlatko Plamenov/freepik.com

DI's role in the crisis has included weaponising the truth. As Lt. Gen. Hockenhull told *The Times*: 'The performance of Defence Intelligence during the current crisis is the culmination of a three-year transformation project. The breadth of influence and impact our dedicated staff have achieved in recent months is unparalleled in our history'.

Twitter has been the most public manifestation of DI's work. Its first Tweets, produced at a time when there was little public understanding of a rapidly developing crisis, were irregular 'key judgements', supplemented by maps, intended to provide basic situational awareness, up to four to five per day. At the time of writing this has developed into regular morning and evening Tweets (with maps) which have included topics such as Russia's use of the Wagner Group, naval movements, the air campaign, and Russia's targeting of civilians. At the time of writing, there have been over 130 DI updates since the start of the conflict.

The recent mantra of DI has been to 'try and get more intelligence out there than ever before'. This presumably requires coordination with the collection agencies and allies on what may be released, adding to the managerial overhead involved in producing this line of reporting. And, inevitably, the tensions inherent in releasing secret intelligence in a credible and authoritative form, whilst protecting source and methods, has attracted criticism of DI's product. The stark and unemotional nature of the messaging has led some to suggest that more detail is needed, while others have pointed to the daily maps as inaccurate in their representation of areas of Ukraine that may not be fully under Russian control. Others have suggested that DI's information says little that cannot be accessed already in quality journalism or online, and offers a selective view of operations in Ukraine given that DI updates focus only on the Russian armed forces.

Such criticism might be valid, and DI sources themselves admit that they are learning on the job. Yet despite the criticism, the information is useful in establishing an authoritative narrative that others draw on. The reporting of DI's judgements

[2] *CP 411, Defence in a Competitive Age, March 2021, p. 65.*

is reflected in the daily growth of retweets, likes, and use of the latest intelligence updates by journalists. Since the start of the conflict, DI's reporting has been some of the most shared content on @DefenceHQ's timeline since Ministry of Defence joined Twitter in 2008. The very success of DI's material is that it presents a series of facts on the ground. The unemotive, fact-based nature of the messaging also offers a professional take that only serves to underline that the intelligence community of today has moved far beyond the problems of Iraq and claims of 'dodgy dossiers'. Strong engagement with the media has also developed trust which has paid dividends.

Lt. Gen. Hockenhull has added his own voice to his organisation's regular output. Just over three weeks after the invasion had started, he argued that Russian strategy had been 'bedevilled' with problems having 'failed to achieve its original objectives'. Russian operations had also shifted to a 'strategy of attrition', likely resulting in more 'civilian casualties, destruction of Ukrainian infrastructure and intensify the humanitarian crisis'. The public use of intelligence by DI has undoubtedly been aided by the growth of Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT). Since 2014, DI has invested heavily in OSINT with CDI emphasising, in 2021, DI's enhanced use of open-source information and commercial services to increase the flow of information of analysts. As noted, there is always tension between revealing intelligence and the protection of sources and the UK's own intelligence history illustrates the dangers of compromising sources for short-term political gain.

The information shared by MOD is just the tip of the iceberg; understandably there is much collected and reported by GCHQ, SIS and allied intelligence that is not made public – as implied by Sir Jeremy's speech. Nonetheless, the war in Ukraine is an open-source bonanza for anyone interested in the situation on the ground. Commercially available satellite imagery, the interception of unenciphered communications, and the near real-time updates from the battlefield, all provide a means of masking information that could have come from classified sources. Whereas in the Cold War, the release of information could have compromised sources, today DI's daily key judgements on Twitter marry up with what's already available in the Twittersphere.

INTELLIGENCE DIPLOMACY

DI's public face is only part of the picture. Behind the scenes, intelligence has more broadly been used to support policy and maintain a united NATO front, as well as support wider diplomacy. As CDI, Lt. Gen. Hockenhull oversaw a series of briefings to Ministers, the Opposition, and MPs on the situation. Moreover, DI has provided timely updates across government, and to – sometimes sceptical – allies. 'We've worked hard to try and get more intelligence out there than ever before', sources told *The Times*.[3] Though the intelligence picture emanating from the UK and US has, as might be expected, largely been in agreement, there have been noticeable differences amongst European allies. DI provided Whitehall – and NATO allies – early warning of Russia's 'special operation', buying time for policy development. The US, and those allies nearer to the Russian threat, were also on board. Estonia's foreign intelligence

[3] *Brown, 'How western spy planes'.*

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"It's been suggested that DI's intelligence was instrumental in overcoming opposition to giving Kyiv anti-tank and anti-air weapons systems... when the invasion did come, Ukraine had next generation anti-tank weapons, the first consignments of NLAW anti-tank missiles [pictured] being delivered in mid-January 2022, with more following as the offensive unfolded."

service (Välisluureamet) pointed to a Russian full-scale military operation from the 'second half of February'.

Other allies, including France and Germany, apparently reached different, and erroneous, conclusions. Recently, Éric Vidaud, France's Director of Military Intelligence, was removed thanks to 'insufficient briefings' and a 'lack of mastery of subjects'.[4] Chief of Defence Staff Thierry Burkhard also admitted that French military intelligence had been caught napping. French analysts believed that an attack, if it was to happen, would only take place in 'favourable weather conditions', and that any invasion would come at a 'monstrous cost and that the Russians had other options'. Information from allies finally convinced them that an attack was imminent.[5]

Here DI – and information from other allies – proved key. The sharing of assessments, while not changing initial views, certainly meant that the NATO allies were in a better position to respond to Russia's invasion, quickly bolstering Ukraine's defence. At home, it's also been suggested that DI's intelligence was instrumental in overcoming opposition to giving Kyiv anti-tank and anti-air weapons systems. According to reports in *The Times*, Ben Wallace had been arguing for lethal aid to be sent to Ukraine in early 2021, supplementing UK support already being provided under Operation Orbital, yet faced opposition as such a move could be seen as 'provocative', some officials believing Putin was 'rational and wasn't going to' invade.[6] When the invasion did come, Ukraine had next generation anti-tank weapons,

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"THE TRUTH HAS ALWAYS BEEN THE BEST PROPAGANDA AND WILL LIKELY REMAIN SO. IN TODAY'S INFORMATION UNIVERSE, SIMPLY OFFERING AN ANODYNE 'NO COMMENT' IS NO LONGER ACCEPTABLE."

the first consignments of NLAW anti-tank missiles being delivered in mid-January 2022, with more following as the offensive unfolded. By mid-March, the UK had provided over 4,000 anti-tank missiles. Additionally, intelligence has played an important behind the scenes role to bolster wider British diplomacy across the globe, providing context and background to the British position.

THE FUTURE?

So, what can the situation tell us about possible future use of intelligence in war? Certainly, the Ukraine experience shows that intelligence engagement, or the public sharing of information, is key. Whether for wider situational understanding, reporting or just interest, the release of intelligence has proved important in shaping a narrative. Just as important has been the use of intelligence to establish facts. The truth has always been the best propaganda and will likely remain so. In today's information universe, simply offering an anodyne 'no comment' is no longer acceptable. Intelligence – even just the key judgements – have proved important in countering Russian disinformation and false narratives, from the build-up of forces to attacks on civilians. Equally, media engagement has developed trust. If Iraq showed the dangers of intelligence, Ukraine shows what can be achieved. Those using intelligence need to maintain this trust; the strength of DI's messaging stemmed from the accurate forecasting of events. Future releases based on improbable or unlikely events would damage DI's well cultivated image and confidence in the assessments.

Naturally, there may be different problems in future crisis. Different situations may also mean different leads. DI has taken the lead on Ukraine given the military nature of the situation and their vast depth of knowledge and experience on the Russian armed forces. Similar state-to-state conflicts might result in a comparable situation, although it is possible to envisage scenarios where the absence of OSINT means there is less 'cover' for secret intelligence, for instance, operations conducted largely in the maritime environment or in less populated regions are unlikely to be so widely reported in social media.

But it's also easy to see how other parts of the UK intelligence apparatus, and even Whitehall generally, can provide intelligence updates for the public and media. There seems nothing preventing UK applying the DI model to the work of the Joint Intelligence Organisation (JIO)/JIC especially on matters that are more political. Equally, as they had done previously, FCDO can also use their social media channels and contacts to disseminate information provided by SIS and GCHQ. And, of course, Whitehall can also learn from the experience of NCSC in pushing intelligence on cyber threats to a wider audience. It's also important to stick to what intelligence officials have got right: intelligence releases in future need to stick to impassive, fact-based reporting. DI's work, in particular, has built up trust in intelligence, helping to eradicate the Iraq legacy.

The West's prebuttal approach may not have deterred a Russian invasion of Ukraine – and, frankly, intelligence can never do that. However, the weaponisation of intelligence by DI and others in the UK and US was, and continues to be, important in countering Russian narratives. Importantly, DI statements on the ground war have also formed an important baseline for journalists and the public. And behind closed doors DI – and other intelligence agencies – have supported the wider military and diplomatic effort. The lessons from Ukraine tell us that agencies need to be more media savvy in future, with analysis disseminated beyond traditional consumers to a wider audience. In essence, intelligence organisations need to be more outward facing. While there may be issues that need ironing out, Ukraine tells us that intelligence can, and should, have its own voice.

[4] *Henry Samuel, 'France's intelligence chief who failed to predict invasion to step down "immediately"', The Telegraph, 31 March 2022.*

[5] *'Guerre en Ukraine : « le rouleau compresseur » russe risque de finir par passer, selon le chef d'état-major des armées', Le Monde, 6 March 2022.*

[6] *Tim Shipman, 'How Ben Wallace fought "securocrats" to donate UK's tank-busting weapons to Ukraine', The Times, 13 March 2022.*