

The invasion of Ukraine and the trauma inflicted on its people are depressing and deeply disturbing, but we must now anticipate a long struggle for Ukraine's freedom. Here, the work of Western intelligence agencies will be crucial, and perhaps more significant than economic sanctions.

American and British intelligence agencies in particular can be proud of their role over the last month. They were the first to identify the dramatic concentration of Russian military forces around the Ukrainian border. Satellite imagery, and other methods available to them, have made it possible not just to identify large numbers of Russian military but to point to blood banks and specialist equipment that would only be needed if an actual conflict was anticipated.

Throughout those same weeks we had repeated statements by Vladimir Putin, Sergey Lavrov, the foreign minister, and other Russian spokesmen, that warnings of an imminent Soviet invasion were "pure fantasy". It is now obvious to the world as a whole that Putin and his cronies were lying through their teeth and that an invasion was Putin's agenda all along, unless the West and Ukraine "did a Munich" and conceded Russia's unrealistic and unjustified demands.

Just as impressive as the technical and professional brilliance of MI6, GCHQ and their American counterparts was the political decision to broadcast these intelligence discoveries and not keep them for purely internal consumption.

Normally, intelligence agencies are opposed to letting the adversary know what they have discovered. They would be concerned that the Russians might be able to block the surveillance, conceal their military deployments or respond in other ways. The West has been able to deny Putin control of the narrative. The Russian president is now seen to have repeated lie after lie, to have misled the Russian people as well as the world, and to be invading a democratic neighbour that has never posed the slightest threat to a Russian territory.

It is true that intelligence served Britain and America badly in attempts to justify the Iraq War. But no such criticism can be made today. Indeed, our intelligence agencies, with their world-leading expertise, have been vindicated. This is not just of historic interest, for Putin now has nowhere to hide his malice. He will now find he has few friends around the world apart from some of the usual suspects.

Looking ahead, intelligence co-operation will need to be intensified with whatever Ukrainian government survives this invasion. Satellite imagery, drones and other methods could be used to provide Ukrainian insurgents with real-time information, harrying Russian occupying forces, inflicting casualties and making their lives miserable.

For years Putin has been cruel but calculating and cautious. On this occasion he has thrown caution to the wind. He will live to regret it as the leaders of the Soviet Union did in Afghanistan in the 1990s. Even if the Ukrainian military is not able to defeat Russia's armed forces, an occupation of parts of Ukraine will be followed by an armed insurgency of its people that could last for years, destroy Putin's reputation and eventually lead to a Russian withdrawal.

Dragoman

Meanwhile, the West will have learnt vital lessons – not least on how to dominate the information space and use intelligence in creative ways.

This piece was first published in The Telegraph.



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