

Researching and Writing Operation Aleppo

On a quiet morning in February 2014 I was in my office. Nothing much seemed to be happening in the world and I was getting on trying to finish a couple of long overdue feature articles for defence magazines. I had BBC Radio 5 Live on in the background and was scrolling through some news websites when reports started to emerge about strange events at the main airport on the Crimea peninsula.

Unidentified armed men were reported to have taken control of the airport. Soon more reports came in about other sites in the Ukrainian territory being blocked by heavily armed men in green uniforms. They would forever be known as Putin's "little green men". Then the first video clips started to appear online. They were obviously Russian special forces - the famous Spetsnaz - and regular naval infantrymen. All my experience - 30 years of military service and work in the specialist defence media - told me they were Russian troops. Their uniforms, weapons, equipment and the insignia on their vehicles just said "RUSSIANS" in the very big capital letters.

Then something strange happened. Broadcast news media began to ask me for comments. For hours during that day, the main news networks refused to come out and describe the men in Crimea as Russian soldiers. I was told: "The Kremlin is denying they are Russian troops"; "How can you be sure"; or, "We are told they are just disgruntled locals". Western governments were equally confused and were not able or willing to make the call that the Russian military had invaded Crimea. By the time, later in the day, that western governments and news media were willing to name and shame the Russians, it was all over. Thousands of Ukrainian troops on Crimea were blockaded in their bases, the regional parliament was in Russian hands and scores of Russian helicopters were flying in reinforcements. By the end of March 2014, the remaining loyal Ukrainian troops had pulled out of Crimea with their tails between their legs.

This was an exercise in the use of strategic surprise on a massive scale. Nothing like this had been seen since the end of the Cold War in 1989. Western governments and the news media were just not able to get their minds around the idea that the Russian President Vladimir Putin would be so audacious as to carry out such a brazen act in the heart of Europe. The "herd mentality" and "group think" of western politicians, diplomats, intelligence analysts, military chiefs, editors, media commentators and journalists just made them unable to believe what was happening. The world had changed.

One of my old friends who worked in the Ministry of Defence in London later provided an important insight that explained much of what happened on that fateful day. The American and British governments have become accustomed to receiving almost real-time intelligence re-

ports on their adversaries and nominal allies from the routine harvesting of global internet traffic by the US National Security Agency and Britain's GCHQ.

"Putin is rightly paranoid about the West's control of the internet and never uses it," said my friend. "On top of that all the old Cold War-era monitoring of Soviet – now Russian – military communications, as well as satellite surveillance of troop, ship and air movements stopped years ago. We were not looking for or expecting trouble from Russia. As a result, we were caught with our pants down in Crimea – the first we knew about the Russian operation was when we saw it on television like everyone else."

Fast forward to the summer of 2015 and the same dynamic was in play in the Middle East. Again, out of the blue, the Russians launched an audacious surprise intervention, this time in Syria. While the Crimea crisis had woken up many western governments and journalists to Putin's modus operandi, there were still many who could not make the leap and get their mind around exactly what the Russians were doing in Syria.

The first indications of Moscow's intervention came from social-media tracking of Russian soldiers by pro-Ukrainian online activists in the late summer of 2015. The Ukrainians had long tried to monitor Russian military operations against their country by tracking the social-media accounts of Moscow's servicemen on Russia's equivalents of Facebook - VKontakte or InContact. Increasing numbers of Russian sailors and naval infantrymen seemed to be in Syria and were posting pictures of their time in the sun. Then Turkish ship-spotters in Istanbul also began to report a surge in Russian transport ships heading south through the Bosphorus into the Mediterranean. By mid-September 2015, construction work was well under way at Hmeinyan airbase to the south of Latakia city in preparation for the arrival of dozens of Russian combat aircraft a few days later.

The strategic surprise was complete again. When Barack Obama met Putin at the United Nations General Assembly in New York at the end of September, the US President warned his Russian counterpart that he would be making a grave mistake if he ordered his air force into action on the side of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Russia would be sucked into a quagmire that it would not be able to escape from, said Obama.

Western media commentators joined the chorus. The Russian intervention was "doomed to failure"; "it was a just a ploy to allow the Russian to persuade the Syrian army to launch a coup d'etat against Assad," or "the Russians were just going to secure their naval base in Tartus and let the rest of the country fall to rebel fighters."

It seemed like the Crimea all over again. "Group think" kicked in and seemed to reject any assessments that did not fit the narrative coming from the White House and 10 Downing Street, or major news organisa-

tions. The idea that the Russians were actually going to help Assad win the Syrian civil war just did not gain any traction until it was too late. Again I reached out to my friends in the British and American militaries who were perplexed at the unwillingness of their political masters to appreciate that the world had changed. “Our politicians just can’t think like the Russians,” said a senior British officer. “We had channelled all our intelligence resources in the Middle East – satellites, signals intelligence, cyber, drones - into watching Islamic State so we largely ignored the Syrians and the Russians. All our masters wanted to hear about was; have we found Jihadi John or some other top Islamic State bad guy yet? It was just not considered a priority to track Syrian troop movements or construction activity at their airbases. Our thinking, and that of our politicians, was conditioned by the media view - who in turn got all their information from the rebels - that Assad was doomed and we did not have to worry about him. We discounted anything that he or the Russians could do as having any impact.”

It was against this background that I began following the Russian intervention in Syria. The western media, because of its strong affinity and links with the Syrian rebels, had largely ignored any sources linked to the Damascus government. There were few journalists or academic experts who knew anything up-to-date about the Syrian government and military. I soon realised that I would have to start from scratch if I was going to get to the bottom about what the Russians were up to in Syria. This book aims to tell the story of how Russia’s armed forces by the end of 2017 delivered their president – and Syria’s president – a major military success and transformed the Middle East. It is not a definitive history of the Syrian civil war, just an examination of an important part of the conflict up to the end of 2017. The war is not over.

There is a tidal wave of information coming out Syria - Twitter and Facebook posts; Instagram images; You Tube video clips; news agency reports; non-government organisation assessments; announcements and commentary from armed groups and political parties in Syria; ministers and spokesmen for the US, British, French, Russian and Turkish governments, as well as others, talk daily about events in Syria.

All of this needs to be treated with a hefty dose of scepticism. Everyone involved in the Syria crisis has an axe to grind, to spin their view or to discredit their opponents. This has always been the case in time of war but the “fog of war” hanging over Syria has been magnified by the near impossibility of independent journalists, analysts or aid workers to get anywhere near to the front-lines in Syria, except in rare circumstances on the government side. Foreign journalists and aid workers have long not even been able to visit rebel-held territory because of the very real risk of being kidnapped and sold to Islamic State radicals for beheading. So, finding out what is happening in Syria requires new ideas and

methods, many of which in the fairly recent past would have only been available to the intelligence agencies and armed forces of major military powers. This being the 21st Century, there are now some tools that can allow the relatively “unfiltered” or “uncensored” monitoring of aircraft and naval movement. To get to Syria, Russian and Iranian ships and aircraft have to move through internationally controlled airspace and shipping lanes, which means they have to switch on GPS tracking transponders - that in turn can be monitored in real-time on the internet. Sometimes these are switched off but for much of the period of the build-up of Russian forces in the summer and autumn of 2015 these transponders were active, allowing an unprecedented view of Moscow’s military deployments.

High resolution satellite imagery of Syria is also available on the open market and this has allowed an unprecedented view of what is happening inside the country. Although there is some time-lag on imagery being posted on line, the imagery available allows the Russian deployment in Syria to be exposed in great detail. Much of this satellite imagery is now hosted on websites, such as Google Earth, Terraserver and Wikimapia, and it allows the provenance of other still and video imagery to be verified. This is a powerful tool to confirm the authenticity of images coming out of Syria. It is a base-line of truth that is very useful to have in your back pocket. The on-line investigative sites www.bellingcat.com and <https://informnapalm.org> have led the way in this field with their work on the investigation into the shooting down of the Malaysian Airlines aircraft over Ukraine in 2014. However, these organisations have their own agenda; the Ukrainian-based Inform Napalm which is heavily involved in on-line research into the Russian military, calls its contributors “soldiers of the information front” against Moscow.

The Russian government has mounted a high-octane propaganda campaign to back up its military deployments in Syria which has also exposed much of what its troops are doing. Although slavishly pro-Moscow in tone, the imagery put out by TASS, Sputnik News and RT.com is hugely revealing in terms of the exact equipment Russia has sent to Syria, how its troops are operating and where they are based - particularly if compared to satellite imagery.

The western news media make extensive use of pro-rebel blogs, Twitter, Facebook pages and other social media but the Syrian, Iranian and Russian military also have their own social-media supporters who pump out a torrent of pictures, video clips, troop deployment maps and commentary about the activities of their own forces. Again, this material is imbued with heavy doses of propaganda but it also provides a window on their world to a degree that has never been known before in a major conflict.

When all this material is pulled together it allows a picture to be built up

of who is doing what and where on the Russian, Iranian and Syrian side, with a degree of confidence. This is not definitive all the time but there are clearly periods when it is possible to have a high-level confidence in this information.

All this on-line information could be termed the “documents of the digital age”. In the wars of the pre-digital age, participants and observers of conflict would record what they saw in letters, diaries or official paper documents. For the wars of the 21st Century new means of communications – cell phones, social media posts, blogs and email – mean there are often no paper records. History has to be sourced in new ways.

Overlying this long-term collection of digital material, I have reached out to my contacts in western armed forces and intelligence organisations to add further information and context. Often their lack of information about Russian and Syrian operations is as telling as what they do know. My contacts in the Russian and Eastern European defence industries have also added further to my understanding of what is happening in Syria and the real capabilities of Moscow’s military hardware.

The final piece of the jigsaw has been contacts with diplomatic sources in Europe linked to the Syrian government in Damascus and some of the few western journalists, clergymen and aid workers who have travelled to Syria and, in some cases, met President Assad and his close confidantes in recent years.

This book is the result of this work. It looks at the Syrian war from the view point of Moscow, Damascus and Tehran. Hopefully this will provide new insights and understanding of “the way the world is,” not the “way we want the world to be”.

Tim Ripley

March 2018