

Caught by Surprise: Warning for Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24th came as a surprise to many. Observers did not expect Russia to invade, even though a suspicious build-up of Russian troops, the statements of Putin, and other significant moments set the alarm bells off. Still, predictions ended up wrong and a lot of experts did not believe an actual invasion would happen. How did they ultimately find themselves caught off guard? This chapter exemplifies the significant challenges during the warning process prior to the invasion for the intelligence community as well as the decision-makers in France, Germany and the United States.

Keywords: Surprise, Strategic warning, Intelligence-policy nexus

1. Introduction

The events on the 24th of February, 2022 left the world in a state of disbelief. During the months leading up to the invasion, British and American intelligence services provided detailed warnings about Russia's plans and intent to invade Ukraine to their respective governments as well as to international partners across the world.¹ Meanwhile, many continental European countries such as Germany and France, were largely surprised by the invasion. German special forces even had to evacuate the head of Germany's foreign intelligence service (BND) from Kyiv on the day the invasion began.² This chapter explores these differences and intends to contribute to answering the following research question: to what extent did Russia's invasion of Ukraine surprise western countries and how can this be explained?

To answer this question the chapter first presents a theoretical framework that addresses the two main concepts of our study: surprise and strategic warning.³

¹ Brown, "How western spy planes keep tabs on Russian tactics."

² Reuters, "Special forces evacuated German spy chief from Ukraine."

³ See e.g.: Gentry and Gordon, *Strategic Warning Intelligence*; Ikani, Cuttmann, and Meyer, "An analytical framework for postmortems of European Foreign Policy?" 197-215; Grabo and Goldman, *Handbook of Warning Intelligence*.

Based on this framework the national warning approaches of France, Germany, and the United States are explored and compared.

2. Surprise and strategic warning

The literature on strategic warning and surprise is strongly concerned with explaining why surprises occurred and whether they were avoidable. A surprise is an occurring event ‘that so contravenes the victim’s expectations that opponents gain a major advantage.’⁴ Surprises occur at all levels of warfare, from strategic to tactical. Levite provides a classical definition of strategic surprise and characterises it ‘as an abrupt revelation – often after being victimised by an attack or a sudden shift in the security environment – that one has been working with a faulty threat perception regarding an acute, imminent danger posed by a foreign threat to core national values.’⁵ In a similar manner Betts considers strategic surprise to be a lack of preparedness based on incorrect judgements regarding when, where or how an attack would take place.⁶

Although the distinction is sometimes difficult to make, there is a difference between a strategic surprise and a tactical surprise that centres on shorter-term, more focused questions about the specificities of threat manifestation, prevention and management.⁷ The classic discussion of strategic versus tactical surprise comes from an analysis of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. While tactically surprising and catastrophic, these attacks were largely not a strategic surprise. The US intelligence community had recognised the threat from Al Qaeda in numerous reports, and decision-makers in the executive branch dedicated long-term resources to increasing defences against attacks.

Whether strategic or tactical, most authors agree that surprise is a matter of degree. Ikani et al.⁸ stress that the existing literature offers little help in distinguishing between different kinds, degrees, and objects of surprise. Neither does current literature discuss how surprise may differ significantly among – as well as between – analysts, policy-planners, and decision-makers. To fill this gap, Ikani et al. have developed a taxonomy of surprise that is presented in Table 3.1.

⁴ Cancian, “Strategic surprise.”

⁵ Levite, *Intelligence and Strategic Surprises*, 1.

⁶ Betts, *Surprise Attack*, 98–110.

⁷ Dahl, *Intelligence and Surprise Attack: Failure and Success from Pearl Harbor to 9/11 and Beyond*.

⁸ Ikani et al., “An analytical framework for postmortems of European Foreign Policy?”

<i>Degree</i> <i>Dimensions</i>	<i>Perfect Surprise</i>	<i>Significant Surprise</i>	<i>Partial Surprise</i>
Dissonance <i>In terms of the recognised gap between event and previous beliefs</i>	Threat not even considered, implies cognitive shock and belief transformation	Threat considered, but deemed impossible or very unlikely, implies major Bayesian belief adaptation	Threat deemed possible, but unlikely, implies slight to moderate Bayesian belief updating
Scope <i>In terms of the range of surprising substantive threat characteristics</i>	Threat both strategically and operationally surprising	All the most relevant operational features of threat are surprising, but strategic notice was available	Some important features of the threat are surprising, strategic notice was available
Spread <i>In terms of who is has been most affected among relevant officials</i>	Entirety of government, analysts and decision-makers	Most analysts and decision-makers	Only some analysts and decision-makers

Table 3.1: A taxonomy of surprise within government⁹

Ikani et al.¹⁰ distinguish three dimensions of surprise. These are dissonance (i.e. the recognised gap between events and previous beliefs), scope (i.e. the range of surprising substantive threat characteristics and risks), and spread (i.e. who has been most affected among relevant officials). In addition to these dimensions, they define three different degrees of surprise. In a ‘perfect surprise’ the threat was not even considered, it was both operationally and strategically surprising, and the entirety of the government was caught by surprise. This category resembles the so-called ‘Black Swans.’¹¹ In the second degree, significant surprise, threats were considered but deemed very unlikely. Strategic notice was available, but most relevant features were surprising and therefore both analysts and decision makers were surprised.¹² In the final category of ‘partial surprise’ the threat was considered unlikely, some important features of the threat were surprising and only some analysts and decision makers were surprised. Take for instance the Arab Uprisings.

⁹ Ikani et al., “An analytical framework for postmortems of European Foreign Policy?” 202

¹⁰ Idem.

¹¹ The Black Swan Theory was first proposed by Nassim Nicholas Taleb in 2007. A Black Swan is an unpredictable event that is beyond what is normally expected of a situation and has potentially severe consequences – they are characterised by their extreme rarity, their severe impact, and widespread insistence they were obvious in hindsight. Nicholas Taleb.

¹² Rietjens, “Caught by surprise. Book Review.”

Despite anticipating some level of ‘instability spill over,’ the exact manner, timing, speed and broader consequences caught many actors by surprise.

Surprises encompass the process of informing decision-makers about potential or ongoing events that impact national security, urging leaders to consider policy decisions or responses to address the threat.¹³ Ikani et al. argue that a well-functioning nexus between knowledge producers such as intelligence services and decision-makers is essential to prevent surprises. They propose a comprehensive set of performance criteria for such a nexus that is shown in Table 3.2.

	Performance criteria	
Knowledge producers	Reflexivity	Accuracy Timeliness Convincingness
Decision-makers		Due attention and prioritisation Openness to inconvenient knowledge claims Deference to superior expertise

Table 3.2: Performance indicators for the intelligence-policy nexus¹⁴

Relevant performance criteria for the knowledge producers are accuracy (accurate judgements about threat aspects), timeliness (threats must be communicated on time), and convincingness (the need for intelligence to be understandable and believable for decision-makers). For decision-makers, the criteria identified are attention and prioritisation (the ability to prioritise the most dangerous events over less relevant threats), openness to inconvenient knowledge claims (the willingness to overcome dominant ideas biases and political conveniences), and deference to superior expertise (decision-makers must accept well-founded knowledge claims). In the context of performance, reflexivity is important to both decision-makers and knowledge producers. This term refers to the idea that both knowledge-producers and decision-makers should critically examine their own biases, methodologies and assumptions during the process of interpreting intelligence information.¹⁵

Together the taxonomy of surprise as well as the performance criteria for the intelligence-policy nexus are used as a lens to diagnose the warning efforts of different countries before Russia’s invasion of the Ukraine.

¹³ Gentry and Gordon, *Strategic Warning Intelligence: History, Challenges, and Prospects*.

¹⁴ Ikani et al., “Estimative intelligence in European foreign policymaking,” 205.

¹⁵ Werd, “Reflexive intelligence and converging knowledge regimes,” 512-526.

3. Warning for a Russian invasion

As the drumbeat of war grew louder in the months before February 24th, 2022, Western intelligence officers, military analysts and political scientists struggled to interpret Putin's intentions.¹⁶ This section explores the warning efforts of three different countries: France, Germany, and the United States. The empirical data is collected by means of desk study and includes numerous documents including news articles, social media posts and open-source warning reports.

3.1 France

The French intelligence services did not accurately and convincingly warn of Russia's invasion of the Ukraine. The chief of the French defence staff, General Burkhard, explained: 'The Americans said that the Russians were going to attack, they were right. Our (intelligence) services thought instead that the conquest of Ukraine would be too great, and the Russians had other options.'¹⁷ This failure to warn led to the resignation of General Eric Vidaud, the director of the Directorate of Military Intelligence (DRM).¹⁸

There were several reasons underlying France's warning failure. In the days following Russia's attack, Vidaud noted that DRM had provided 'inadequate briefings' and 'lacked expertise' on key issues.¹⁹ He argued that the DRM traditionally focused on locations where French military and troops are active. Consequently, the DRM has much expertise on areas such as the Sahel region, but was less equipped to make judgements on the Russia-Ukraine conflict.²⁰

A second factor contributing to France's wrong assessment is related to several biases, both within the services as well as amongst the senior decision-makers. Kleine-Brockhoff, Vice-President of the German Marshall Fund, stressed that 'we [France and Germany] wanted to believe that Russia would become a responsible stakeholder in the current European and global order... We have chosen to overlook the indications to the contrary.'²¹ Also President Macron, who spoke regularly to President Putin in the days leading up to 24th February,²² failed to demonstrate any sign of Putin's behaviour

¹⁶ Eckel, "How did everybody get the Ukraine invasion predictions so wrong."

¹⁷ Keiger, "Who's to blame for France's catastrophic intelligence failure in Ukraine?"

¹⁸ Bondarev, former member of the Russian delegation to the United Nations. See his article: "Diplomat defects from the Kremlin."

¹⁹ Dodman, "Wrong about Putin: Did Germany and France turn a blind eye to the threat from Russia?"

²⁰ Idem.

²¹ Idem.

²² BBC, "French intelligence chief Vidaud fired over Russian war failings."

and plan to invade Ukraine. Due to France's tradition of maintaining special ties with Moscow, its view and obsession of Russia as a major power has for a prolonged duration channelled the dialogue between France and Russia.²³ As a result, Macron gave significant importance to the relationship with Russia. Following his predecessors, he tried to establish a shared European security framework that included Russia. During a European Commission meeting a couple of months prior to the invasion, Macron repeated that for Europe it should be the foremost political priority to include Russia in the European security framework.²⁴ As the French president tried to keep the lines of dialogue and negotiations open, this special relationship, however, turned out to be one-sided. In March 2021, the head of France's armed forces, General Thierry Buckhard admitted that there have been different views on the intelligence available. Around the same time, officials within Macron's office stated that Putin seemed clearly 'paranoid' and therefore it would be hard to predict his movements.²⁵

France's assessment was furthermore hindered by a lack of coordination and coherence. Until a few months before the attack, data collectors and analysts were geographically split. While the collectors were at the Air Force base outside Paris, the analysts were located at the Ministry of Armed Forces in downtown Paris.²⁶ This negatively impacted the speed as well as the quality of the intelligence process.

In reaction to this failure, DRM took several measures. It created 'intelligence fusion cells' to improve the coordination between data-miners and analysts and broadened their intelligence focus. French General Cyril Carcey, now serving as the Deputy Director of the DRM, explained that the DRM can 'no longer focus on a 60-degree angle between Western Africa and the Middle-East dictated by the fight against terrorism.' As a result, he continued, 'we constantly look around with a 360-degree spectrum, not only geographically-speaking, but also with the integration of space, cyber and underwater domains.'²⁷

3.2 Germany

Like France, the Russian invasion of the Ukraine largely caught Germany by surprise. The most illustrative example of this surprise was the evacuation of Bruno Kahl, the head of Germany's foreign intelligence service. He was in Kyiv the

²³ Gnesotto, "Relations with Russia: France's unique position."

²⁴ Heng, "France and Russia benefit from special relationship."

²⁵ Cobbe, "French Military intel chief's resignation as fallout for misjudging Putin's intentions in Ukraine."

²⁶ Delaporte, "French military intelligence office reorganizing post-Ukraine, with '360 degree' threat-analysis."

²⁷ Idem.

moment Russia invaded and 'had to be taken home overland in a grueling two-day journey by special forces when the country's airspace was closed.'²⁸

The reasons for this surprise were manifold. According to Annalena Baerbock, Germany's foreign minister, Berlin failed to listen to eastern European allies who did warn of threats from Moscow.²⁹ Overall, this was because Germany has been resorting to what has been called 'checkbook diplomacy'; or rather a belief that political and economic successes would lead Russia to a democratic path. In this regard, *Wandel durch Handel* marked the idea that closer economic links were needed with Russia as it became more intertwined with Europe's and Germany's. For many years this approach has been successful as it pushed the integration of Russia and expanded commercial ties with the West in general and Germany in particular. As a result, the ideas of checkbook diplomacy and *Wandel durch Handel* widely resonated amongst the German population as well. A poll by the Kantar Public Institute for example revealed that 52% of the Germans wanted the government to act cautiously in international affairs. While 41% of the Germans opted for a stronger German presence, the great majority of them preferred a diplomatic way.³⁰ Reflecting on this, Nick Schmid, spokesperson for Germany's Social Democratic Party, argued 'it's a bitter acknowledgment that for 30 years we emphasized dialogue and co-operation with Russia... Now we have to recognize that this has not worked. That's why we have entered a new era for European security.'³¹

Also, Germany's intelligence and security services faced a lot of criticism for the lack of warning of the invasion. Like the German decision makers, German intelligence services had a good relationship with the Russians. John Sipher, former CIA officer in Moscow even argued: 'For too many years, German security services arrogantly thought they understood Russia, while at the same time the Russian services were stealing them blind.'³²

There were also other reasons that fuelled the critique of Germany's services. Some sources state that the services believed Russian troops along the Ukrainian border were part of 'an exercise' and the 'worst-case scenario would not happen.'³³ Others state that post-Cold War thinking and the earlier mentioned *Wandel durch*

²⁸ Reuters, "Special forces evacuated German spy chief from Ukraine."

²⁹ Pitel, "Robert Habeck adds to criticism of German intelligence blunders. Foreign service failed to foresee Russia's invasion of Ukraine, deputy chancellor says."

³⁰ Schwarz, "Understanding Germany's half-hearted support of Ukraine."

³¹ McGuinness, "Ukraine War: Germany's conundrum over its ties with Russia."

³² Pitel, "Robert Habeck adds to criticism of German intelligence blunders. Foreign service failed to foresee Russia's invasion of Ukraine, deputy chancellor says."

³³ Idem.

Handel were so prevalent in German policy circles that it underspent its own military and outsourced its security to others – mostly the United States.³⁴

Two former chiefs of the BND German foreign intelligence agency, *Bundesnachrichtendienst*, Gerhard Schindler and August Hanning, stated the warning failure was due to risk aversion, bureaucracy and excessive oversight.³⁵ Schindler and Hanning warned Berlin politicians through a joint-op ed for ‘running down the country’s intelligence capacity through a mixture of bureaucracy and underfunding.’³⁶ They referred to the BND as lacking funds and human intelligence sources, making it severely difficult for officials to make decisions based on good intelligence. Being the only service that operates abroad, these former heads considered the BND to be a ‘toothless watch dog.’

Overall, Germany largely underestimated Putin’s aggression and its plans to invade Ukraine. The invasion, however, triggered Germany to make significant changes in their security and foreign policies and ended the unrestricted dialogue and co-operation between Germany and Russia.³⁷

3.3 *United States*

Unlike the French and German intelligence services, the US intelligence community provided adequate strategic warning about Russia’s invasion. Many observers consider the US intelligence community’s assessments as a great intelligence success, breaking the negative track-record that after 9/11 has been central to the U.S. intelligence community.

In the spring of 2021, Jon Finer, deputy national security adviser, NSC, White House, stated: ‘we started to see a concerning build-up of Russian forces on the border with Ukraine, given the history of 2014 and the conflict that has been going on ever since, it raised concerns about their intention.’³⁸ While the pacing threat at that moment was China, the National Defense Strategy pointed to Russia as the acute threat. A couple of months later as the buildup continued, some signs were given that it was not just force buildup for diplomatic effect. Avril Haines, director of National Intelligence, even stated ‘Putin is clearly considering military action on some level.’³⁹

³⁴ Blumenau and Muttreja, “How Russia’s invasion changed German foreign policy.”

³⁵ Pitel, “Robert Habeck adds to criticism of German intelligence blunders. Foreign service failed to foresee Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, deputy chancellor says.”

³⁶ O’Reilly, “Ex-intel chiefs: German Foreign Intelligence Agency on the verge of collapse.”

³⁷ McGuinness, “Ukraine war: Germany’s conundrum over its ties with Russia.”

³⁸ Banco, Graff, Seligman, Toosi, and Ward. “Something was badly wrong: When Washington realized Russia was actually invading Ukraine.”

³⁹ Banco, et al., “Something was badly wrong: When Washington realized Russia was actually invading Ukraine.”

The Geneva Summit in June 2021, at which both Putin and Biden were present, provided an opportunity to discuss the tensions between Russia and Ukraine. This seemed to have some positive effects as the Russians withdrew some forces directly after the summit. This was, however, for a short time only. In October 2021, briefings were given in the White House that flagged Russian troop movements and a build-up of military troops.⁴⁰ These briefings indicated that Russia had deployed 70,000 troops with the potential capability of deploying up to 175,000 troops. Despite the build-up, US officials believed that the deployments were designed to 'obfuscate intentions and create uncertainty.'⁴¹

General Mark Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, stated: 'As there was planned a Russian exercise called Zapad, they started marshaling the troops for the exercise in the September time frame. Right about then we realized this is odd; it was much bigger in scale and scope than the previous year's exercise.'⁴² The Central Intelligence Agency's director Bill Burns agreed with these unmarkable signs of a Russian build-up along Ukrainian borders. Also, Antony Blinken, the Secretary of State remarked: 'through the information that we got, we had an understanding of what the Russian leadership was actually thinking and planning for those forces.'⁴³ Other officials within the National Security Council, still believed the Geneva Summit made Putin come to his senses.

Another important moment was the G-20 Meeting in the autumn of 2021. Although Russia participated, Putin did not show up but sent foreign minister Sergey Lavrov instead. Biden talked directly to the French, German and UK prime ministers and shared the information the US had gathered on Russia's plans.⁴⁴

In the months leading to the February 24th invasion, US intelligence services as well as policy makers started to intensify their intelligence disclosures. There were several different reasons to do so. Dylan and Maguire⁴⁵ convincingly argue that these disclosures were aimed at influencing external audiences. They should, amongst others, deter Russia, prevent false flag operations and convince other countries, most notably France and Germany. At first, many remained in disbelief. As Avril Haines, Director of National Intelligence, explained: 'It was hard to believe at first, honestly. Most people said, "Really? A large-scale military option? That seems unlikely!"' Although the US intelligence services remained unclear about when and how an invasion would take place, gradually many officials within US

⁴⁰ Abdalla, et al., "Intelligence and the war in Ukraine, part I."

⁴¹ Idem.

⁴² Banco, et al., "Something was badly wrong: When Washington realized Russia was actually invading Ukraine."

⁴³ Idem.

⁴⁴ Idem.

⁴⁵ Dylan and Maguire, "Secret intelligence and public diplomacy in the Ukraine War," 33-74.

policy and intelligence circles became convinced an invasion was going to happen. The UK, being the main European partner of the US, soon followed. As Karen Pierce, the British Ambassador to the United States, stated: ‘It did not take too long for the whole UK system to think this would be an invasion.’⁴⁶ Other countries, most notably France and Germany, were still not convinced. The occupation of Iraq and the long war in Afghanistan very much undermined its credibility to do so. Liz Truss, former UK Prime Minister, stressed: ‘We were sitting on very serious, good intelligence, but – for whatever reason- that wasn’t necessarily the shared view of what was going to happen. Our allies had a different view...I think none of us wanted to believe.’⁴⁷

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that the surprise surrounding Russia’s invasion had varying degrees of impact. In the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the international community found itself grappling with the shock of the event many had failed to predict. Hence, this chapter delved into the complexities of surprise, examining the varying responses of Germany, France and the United States. Each country’s unique approach to intelligence gathering, decision-making and assessing Russia’s intentions resulted in different degrees of surprise. In conjunction with the theoretical framework of Ikani et al., this chapter serves as a cautionary tale, emphasising the need for constant vigilance and adaptability in the ever-evolving landscape of global security.

Tables 3.3 and 3.4 summarise the main findings of this chapter.

⁴⁶ Government U.K., “Karen Pierce DCMG.”

⁴⁷ Banco, et al., “Something was badly wrong: When Washington realized Russia was actually invading Ukraine.”

<i>Degree</i> <i>Dimensions</i>	<i>Perfect Surprise</i>	<i>Significant Surprise</i>	<i>Partial Surprise</i>
<i>Dissonance</i>	<i>Germany and France:</i> - Intelligence services considered Russian troops along the Ukrainian border to be part of an exercise. - Great gap between the event (invasion) and the previous beliefs (economic and diplomatic integration in Europe). - The head of the BND was evacuated from Ukraine at the start of the invasion.		<i>United States:</i> The threat of an invasion was identified, but it was unknown how it would play out.
<i>Scope</i>		<i>France and Germany:</i> Multiple warnings were given, both failed to listen and stayed in unbelief.	<i>United States:</i> The U.S. intelligence community accurately predicted the invasion was going to take place. They remained unclear, however, about when and how an invasion would take place.
<i>Spread</i>	<i>France and Germany:</i> Both intelligence services and policymakers were surprised.		<i>United States:</i> Neither decision-makers nor the intelligence community were surprised

Table 3.3: Degrees of surprise

	Accuracy	Timeliness	Convincingness
France	• Invasion and conquest deemed unlikely. • Lack of coordination within the intelligence services impacted quality. • Expertise on areas such as the Sahel region, making the DRM less equipped to judge other areas.	• Lack of coordination within the intelligence services impacted speed. • Lack of resources within DRM.	• Both the intelligence services and the policymakers did not want to believe Putin was planning to invade. • Inadequate briefings and lack of expertise.
Germany	• Germany's intelligence service failed to foresee the invasion and rather believed it was just an exercise. • German services incorrectly believed they understood Russia.		• While assessment was wrong, it seemed convincing as it was in line with decision-makers' perceptions.
U.S.	• The buildup of Russian troops and military equipment was spotted early, but it remained unclear when and where the invasion would happen.	• Failed to grasp combat capabilities of Russian forces but warning was timely.	• Due to its earlier intelligence failures the U.S had troubles convincing others, but at least succeeded domestically as well as in the case of some allies, most notably the UK.

Table 3.4: Performance indicators for the intelligence-policy nexus

	Due attention & prioritization	Openness to inconvenient knowledge claims	Deference to superior expertise
France	The focus of the DRM on places where French troops are active is unlikely to be made without political imperative.	US and UK intelligence dissemination, presenting an entirely different threat assessment, were not believed.	Not applicable as both producers and decision-makers shared the same threat perception.
Germany	- Emphasis on dialogue and co-operation with Moscow (checkboxbook diplomacy). - Focus was more on risk aversion, bureaucracy and excessive oversight than threats. - Germany underspent its military and intelligence services.	- Moscow-centric bias. - Berlin failed to listen to eastern European allies who did warn of threats from Moscow.	It took a war in Ukraine for Germany to accept the real threat coming from Putin.
U.S.	Ever since 2014 Crimea Russia had the attention of both intelligence as well as policy makers.	Agenda competition: Afghanistan.	Not applicable as both producers and decisionmakers shared the same threat perception.

Conclusively, the French and German miscalculations seemed a product of skepticism and misjudgment. They were unable to grasp Putin's true intentions and simultaneously thought to hold a special relationship with Moscow. Both countries experienced significant challenges and faced several shortcomings in accurately warning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In line with their German counterparts, who long resorted to their idea of 'checkbook diplomacy' and *Handel durch Wandel*, French decision-makers contemplated that political and economic successes possibly could lead to a democratic path for Russia.

The United States, to the contrary, warned multiple times and widely shared intelligence in the months leading to the February 24th invasion. Ever since 2014 Crimea, both US intelligence agencies as well as decision-makers have focused on Russia. The US intelligence community was largely successful in providing strategic warning about Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but still suffered from a tactical surprise. Moreover, previous intelligence failures impacted the convincingness of their claims.

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