

Explainer: Britain's Proxy War on Russia

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UK participation in the Ukraine conflict is far-reaching, involving military and intelligence support, arms supplies and information warfare. But as Ukraine makes gains on the battlefield, Whitehall sees the war not only as a way to defend Kyiv but to ensure the strategic defeat of its rival, Russia – a dangerous strategy.

The Ukraine conflict is also a British one, given the extensive UK role in the war, with Whitehall supporting Kyiv to repel Russia's brutal invasion in numerous ways outlined in this Explainer.

However, UK governments do not go to war for moral or humanitarian purposes; only for strategic gain. In Ukraine, Whitehall's main goal is to counter Russia, a power UK governments have long wanted to put back in its box and end Moscow's independent foreign policy, which challenges NATO's supremacy in the whole of Europe and, to an extent, the Middle East.

Russia's brutal invasion needs to be condemned and reversed, Ukrainian sovereignty upheld and the rights of Ukrainians defended.

But the reasons for this to Whitehall planners are not their professed high-minded claims about defending democracy or stopping Russian war crimes – the UK is perfectly happy to acquiesce in [such crimes](#) in its own current conflicts, notably Yemen.

London's interest in democracy is nowhere to be seen when it comes to supporting various dictatorships such as in the Gulf or Egypt. And its opposition to illegal foreign occupations is put aside when it comes to its increasing military [support](#) for Israel.

The problem with Russia



Whitehall sees the Ukraine war as an opportunity. Liz Truss has gone so far to [say](#) that “we will cripple Russia’s economic development in both the short and long term” with the sanctions imposed on the country following its invasion of Ukraine in February.

Image is by Tim Hammond / No10 Downing Street, licensed under CC

She has also in effect [called](#) for regime change in Moscow, saying the UK “can never allow Russia to be in a position to undertake this aggression again... which is why we wholeheartedly support Navalny”, referring to imprisoned opposition leader Alexander Navalny.

In a sign of how Russia is firmly in the sight of British leaders, the new head of the British Army, General Sir Patrick Sanders, [has even told](#) troops they need to be ready to face Russia on the battlefield.

Whitehall’s major problem with Moscow is that it “is seeking its own independent sphere of influence separate to any American-backed global order or rule book”, the then head of the British army, General Sir Mark Carleton-Smith, [said](#) last year.

Unacceptably to British planners, Russia elected to become a rival. Then defence secretary Michael Fallon [said](#) in 2017 that “Russia has chosen to become a strategic competitor of the West”.

His successor, Gavin Williamson [expressed](#) a similar lament, saying that “after 1990 we ... believed there would be only one superpower”, referring to the US. Now, “Russia wants to assert its rights”, he [complained](#).

This Russian independence and rivalry has contributed to the “erosion of strategic advantage” for the West which must be regained, General Sanders [says](#). The UK wants to see Russia confined to a status of global pariah.

Whitehall is making extraordinary efforts to help Ukraine, and defeat Russia, in its war. Six main contributions can be identified.

1. Foreign fighters

There have been several reports of “retired” SAS soldiers being active in Ukraine. Whether this is correct or a Whitehall ruse is hard to establish.

Days after the invasion, a “crack team” of “retired” UK special forces soldiers were reported to have [volunteered](#) “for missions deep inside Ukraine”. They were said to be highly-trained snipers and experts in the use of anti-aircraft and anti-tank missiles. The following month three of the soldiers were [killed](#) in a Russian airstrike.

The UK forces are believed to be directly killing Russians. One [report](#) in June claimed that a team of ex-SAS soldiers, all veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, had killed up to 20 Russian generals and 15 mercenaries of the pro-Moscow Wagner Group.

As many as 3,000 Britons may be fighting in Ukraine, [according](#) to one source – a Georgian commander who said there are around 20,000 foreign soldiers in the country in total. By our count around nine Britons have been killed or captured in Ukraine, with five just released.

Some are [reported](#) to have left the British army to join the conflict. “A small number of serving British personnel have disobeyed orders and may have travelled to Ukraine to fight”, defence minister James Heappey [told](#) parliament in June.

Initially, then foreign secretary Liz Truss [encouraged](#) Britons to go to Ukraine, and many subsequently did so, [including](#) the son of a senior Conservative politician.

Ministers then backtracked and [said](#) they didn’t want Britons joining the war at all. The government now [says](#) that fighting in Ukraine may amount to an offence under UK legislation and open people up to prosecution on their return to the UK. But no-one is so far known to have been prosecuted.

2. Official boots on the ground

The UK [sent](#) special forces to Ukraine in February, weeks before the invasion, with SAS, SBS, the Special Reconnaissance Regiment and the Special Forces Support Group working in the country to train Ukrainian special forces in counter-insurgency tactics, sniping and sabotage.

Those special forces were soon [instructing](#) local troops in Ukraine’s capital Kyiv on how to use British-supplied anti-tank missiles that were delivered in late February as the invasion was beginning.

In July the Ministry of Defence [said](#) it had 97 troops in Ukraine but it has been unwilling to [divulge](#) their location.

□ Ministry of Defence confirms UK military personnel are in [#Ukraine](#) — but won’t give the “exact number” or their location. [#DCUKparliament pic.twitter.com/UiUsijHGTt](#)

— Declassified UK (@declassifiedUK) [May 17, 2022](#)

3. UK arms killing Russians

It’s not only British soldiers but also UK arms that are killing Russians. Earlier this month defence secretary Ben Wallace [told](#) parliament that long-range weaponry supplied by the UK and other states had enabled Ukraine to strike more than 350 Russian command posts, ammunition dumps, supply depots, and “other high-value targets far back from the

frontline”.

The UK’s [supply](#) of £2.3 billion in military assistance to Ukraine has included [over 10,000](#) anti-tank missiles, hundreds of other missiles and guns, 200 armoured fighting vehicles, and three million rounds of small arms ammunition.

Precisely how the UK is spending its military aid is secret – the government has [refused](#) to give a full breakdown of its expenditure.

□ The UK ministry of defence refuses to give a breakdown of the £2.3bn in public money it is spending on the Ukraine war.

More excessive state secrecy. [#DCUKparliament](#) pic.twitter.com/RGRTLEUiRF

— Declassified UK (@declassifiedUK) [September 13, 2022](#)

Neither is it known how many Russian soldiers these British arms have killed, but the figure may be substantial – Wallace claims Russia has lost no less than [25,000](#) soldiers in Ukraine.

It is likely that UK-supplied next generation light anti-tank weapons (NLAWs) have been especially devastating, and they have been credited with helping to stall Moscow’s armoured units.

The UK has essentially been [coordinating](#) the international supply of weapons into Ukraine since the invasion. British arms are being purposely provided “to go beyond” defending Ukraine to enable it to “mount offensive operations”, the UK government has [said](#).

Indeed, defence minister James Heappey has [backed](#) Ukraine striking targets inside Russia with UK-supplied weapons. Heappey observed: “We don’t seek to tell the Ukrainians what they can and can’t be used for other than they should be used in a lawful way”.

It appears Ukraine is acting as a [testing ground](#) for new British weapons. Ukrainian troops have, for example, used Martlets, a laser-guided missile initially designed to help the Royal Navy combat swarms of small, unmanned attack boats. The Martlet is a weapon being tested by UK troops that is yet to be fully deployed by the British military.

More generally, the UK is [using](#) Ukraine “as an opportunity to showcase British-made arms”, the *Independent’s* Andrew Buncombe reports. Liz Truss, as foreign secretary, was unequivocal about this: she [said](#) in March that British arms for Ukraine are “a very important export for us”, and contribute to jobs and growth.

4. Military training

Britain’s military training is directly aiding Ukrainian combat operations. Thousands of Ukrainian soldiers are being [given](#) intensive infantry instruction, including on urban warfare and marksmanship, at an army base in England.

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Training in the use of anti-tank weapons is one direct way the UK is aiding the Ukrainian military, but there are others. For example, SBS special forces [instructed](#) Ukrainian troops how to use small submarines called 'sea scooters' in order to help take back Snake Island, which lies 22 miles off Ukraine's south coast in the Black Sea, from the Russians.

The UK training may also help the British military itself to fight Russians directly. In a candid comment, Baroness Goldie, a UK defence minister, recently [told](#) parliament the instruction of Ukrainians provides "a great learning opportunity, because our troops are learning what our enemy does in the latest battlefield situation and how we should deal with it".

5. Intelligence support

Information on support to Ukraine from the UK intelligence agencies is, as ever, murky. But US reporter Tom Rogan, citing three Western intelligence sources, [writes](#) that the UK military effort is being led by MI6 and that "Ukraine's deep battlespace effort owes especial thanks to Britain — specifically to British strike and reconnaissance special forces personnel inside Ukraine".

The US and UK are providing satellite, electronic warfare, signals, and cyber intelligence, Rogan writes.

He adds that Ukraine's escalating campaign is a direct extension of long-standing British special forces doctrine. This involves the deployment of very small (4, 8 or 16 person) patrols deep into enemy territory which gather targeting intelligence for commanders at the rear.

Those teams also conduct sabotage operations against targets such as logistics trains, command centres, and high-value targets such as aircraft, ammunition dumps, and fuel depots.

MI6 is known to have had contacts with Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky since well before the invasion. In October 2020 Zelensky is said to have held a secret [meeting](#) with MI6 chief Richard Moore in the UK. Zelensky [told](#) the media one of the subjects discussed related to countering disinformation and fake news.

British and US spy planes are also monitoring Russian battlefield communications by

conducting regular missions on the fringes of Ukraine's airspace, it is [reported](#). Intelligence gathered by three RAF electronic surveillance aircraft, known as Airseekers, is fed back to Defence Intelligence in London – and, presumably, on to Ukraine.

Jeremy Fleming, head of the UK's largest intelligence agency, GCHQ, has [said](#) the UK is “shoring up” Ukraine's defences by supporting its cyber security, but gave no further details.

But GCHQ is certain to be playing a role in the war. It has [said](#) it supports UK troops “whenever and wherever” they are deployed.

6. Information war

Britain's key role in the information war against Russia builds on long standing support to Ukraine. Simon Baugh, chief executive of the UK Government Communication Service – which oversees government media operations – [says](#) Britain has provided “strategic communications support” to the government in Kyiv since 2016.

This ranges “from helping to build a professional communications capability at the centre of Government, to building resilience to cyber security threats, to jointly delivering a campaign to support the shared values of our democracies”.

Before the invasion, at the start of February, Whitehall created a Government Information Cell, drawing on 35 staff from across different ministries, which seeks to counter Russian disinformation.

Baugh says this Cell works with NATO, the EU and the Five Eyes intelligence network (involving the US, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the UK) and “creates content to bolster the morale and confidence of the Ukrainian people by showing them they are not alone”.

He adds: “We are building the capability to deliver fast communication with impact, in real-time and on the basis of 24/7 monitoring, content production, response and rebuttal.”

The focus on “content production” is noteworthy. Baugh claims that the Cell does not propagate disinformation itself and that “our model is based on the UK Government using facts to expose the truth”.

This is not easy to verify, however, as the Cell's activities are opaque. Various apparently false stories are [appearing](#) in the media about Russia, with unclear provenance. Assertions are being made by UK intelligence agencies which are also difficult or impossible to verify, such as GCHQ'S [claim](#) that Putin's advisers were lying to him about Russia's performance in Ukraine.

My colleague Matt Kennard recently [found](#) the UK government was spending over £80m on media projects in Eastern Europe, in countries surrounding Russia, which are often presented as fighting “Russian disinformation”.

There is a long [history](#) of the UK promoting covert information operations, including the planting of false material in media outlets.

What is clearer is that Whitehall is investing in promoting one-sided information, which can

amount to a form of propaganda. In March, for example, the government [announced](#) an additional £4.1 million in “emergency funding” to the BBC World Service to support its Ukrainian and Russian language services broadcasting into both countries.

The UK’s proxy war on Russia is very high risk given Moscow’s losses on the battlefield due partly to UK military activity and arms supplies combined with Russia having the world’s largest arsenal of nuclear weapons. Russia, like Nato, likely sees nuclear arms as [useable](#) weapons.

Putin may be most likely to employ nuclear missiles precisely at the point of British/Ukrainian military ‘success’, i.e., if Moscow were close to defeat, and especially if Ukraine looked like recapturing Crimea, a region Russia regards as its own territory, which it illegally annexed in 2014.

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Mark Curtis is the editor of Declassified UK, and the author of five books and many articles on UK foreign policy.

Featured image: Defence Secretary Ben Wallace meets with Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu at the Ministry of Defence, 11 February 2022. (Photo: Tim Hammond/No 10 Downing Street)

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