



War in the shadows: CIA and British special forces, the Western machine behind Ukrainian resistance

Published on 17/08/2026

When Russian armored columns crossed the Ukrainian border on February 24, 2022, Moscow believed it knew the enemy it faced. It knew the Ukrainian Army, had studied its capabilities, and had spent months preparing a gigantic military operation intended, in the Kremlin's view, to rapidly bend Kyiv to its will.

But something was missing from the maps. **Behind Ukraine, a Western machine had already been built:** not NATO divisions openly deployed on the field, but intelligence, satellites, intercepts, training, military planning and advice. A network that had grown in the shadows for years and was destined to weigh far more than it appeared publicly in the first months of the war.

At the center of this story are especially two protagonists: **the United States, with the CIA and its military and intelligence apparatus, and the United Kingdom, with a military**

presence far deeper than had initially appeared publicly.

And in the background inevitably emerge also them: the **UK Special Forces**, the secretive world in which the SAS and SBS operate.

This is not the story of a NATO fighting in place of Ukraine. It is the story, far more complex, of how the West contributed to transforming Ukraine into an adversary enormously more difficult to destroy.

It all begins long before 2022

To understand what happened in the first weeks of the invasion, one must go back to **2014**, when Russia occupied and annexed Crimea and conflict with Moscow-backed separatists erupted in the Donbass. From that moment on, for Kyiv, confrontation with Russia stopped being merely political and became a war destined to last. It was precisely then that collaboration with the United States took shape, which in the following years would assume enormous weight.

A detailed reconstruction published by **ABC News** in January 2025, based on testimonies from numerous former American and Ukrainian officials, places the origin of the CIA and Ukrainian intelligence partnership in 2014.

The United States began contributing to the reconstruction and professionalization of Ukrainian apparatus that still carried the legacy of the Soviet era and had been heavily penetrated by Russian intelligence.

The objective was not simply to provide information, but to **build capabilities**: train personnel, create structures, improve intelligence gathering and analysis, and gradually make Kyiv more capable of reading Moscow's moves. Year after year, that network would become increasingly sophisticated.

When Putin ordered the general invasion in February 2022, **the CIA was not beginning to know the Ukrainians: it had been working with them for years.**

The West had foreseen the invasion

One of the most striking aspects of the war concerns what happened even before the first shot was fired. The United States had understood that Russia was preparing something enormous.

William Burns, director of the CIA, later publicly explained how the American intelligence community had managed during 2021 to build an increasingly clear picture of Russian preparations for a major invasion of Ukraine, as also emerges from the **official hearings of the U.S. intelligence community**.

Washington did something unusual: it began to **make classified intelligence information public**, anticipating Russian moves and intentions. The objective was to deprive Moscow of one of its traditionally most effective tools, strategic surprise, and limit its ability to construct an alternative narrative about events. Putin attacked anyway, but did not find a completely blind Ukraine before him.

Then the real war began

From the first hours of February 24 the problem became brutally simple: find the enemy, track its movements, identify its commands, understand its intentions and transform all of this into targets before Russia could do the same.

This is where Western contribution assumes a completely different dimension.

In subsequent years details progressively emerged about the depth of cooperation between the United States and Ukraine.

One of the most important reconstructions is that published in March 2025 by the *New York Times*, based on hundreds of interviews, which described the architecture of military collaboration between Washington and Kyiv.

One of the nerve centers became **Wiesbaden, in Germany**, headquarters of U.S. Army Europe and Africa.

From there, Americans and Ukrainians built a system through which information from the immense Western intelligence apparatus could be transformed into elements useful for military planning.

The reconstruction by the *British Times* confirms the central role assumed by Wiesbaden, defined by former Ukrainian commander Valerii Zaluzhnyi as a sort of **“secret weapon”** to

coordinate operational planning and front-line needs.

This is probably the key to understanding the effect of Western assistance. A satellite locates, a sensor intercepts, an intelligence service analyzes, a command identifies a vulnerability and the information is transformed into an operational opportunity. **The soldier who pulls the trigger remains Ukrainian, but behind that trigger there can exist a gigantic information chain.**

The “kill chain” that Moscow had to face

And this is where the relationship between Ukraine and the United States becomes militarily decisive.

Modern warfare is not won only by whoever possesses more tanks, cannons or missiles. What also matters is the speed with which one manages to close the cycle **detect, identify, decide, strike and verify.**

In military terms, it means compressing the *kill chain*.

And it is exactly the sector in which the enormous Western superiority in intelligence could at least partially compensate for Russian quantitative superiority.

Ukraine possessed extremely motivated fighters, commanders who had accumulated experience since 2014 and a growing autonomous capability.

The United States could add something that Kyiv alone could not have quickly replicated: **a global network of satellites, SIGINT, reconnaissance, analysis and command.**

The combination could produce devastating effects, without however transforming the West into an omniscient observer. Russia continued to advance, conquer territories and inflict enormous losses. But one thing had changed: **the Russian Army was not fighting against the same adversary it would have faced ten years earlier.**

And then there are the British

If American intervention was characterized mainly by the gigantic technological and informational capacity of the United States, the British one appears in some respects even more aggressive and direct.

The United Kingdom worked with Ukrainian forces long before the invasion.

Through **Operation Orbital**, London had launched a training mission from 2015 that preceded the large-scale conflict by years. British assistance continued to evolve, and on the eve of the invasion, British military personnel trained Ukrainians in the use of NLAW anti-tank missiles as well.

In January 2022, London had begun transferring thousands of NLAWs to Ukraine.

A few weeks later, those systems would be used against Russian columns. It was certainly not the NLAWs alone that “saved Kyiv”: the defeat of the Russian offensive on the capital was the product of logistical problems, terrain, Ukrainian resistance, planning errors and intelligence. But the point remains: **when the Russian tanks arrived, the Ukrainians already had the weapons and already knew how to use them.** It was not by chance, but the result of preparation that began before the invasion.

The British in the planning

In the following years, it emerged how deeply involved London was at higher levels as well.

An investigation by the *Times* in April 2025 described the role played by British military leadership, particularly by the then Chief of the Defence Staff **Admiral Sir Tony Radakin**, together with other senior British officers.

The relationship with Kyiv was not simply about material delivery.

The British participated in the evaluation of plans, in *war games*, in the analysis of operational needs and in the liaison between Ukrainian and American leadership.

According to the *Times* reconstruction, British officers participated in that typical work of a general staff that precedes every offensive: verifying whether the plan was realistic, whether men and ammunition were sufficient, where the enemy could have reacted and what capabilities were lacking to make the operation sustainable.

At Wiesbaden, British, American and Ukrainian officials thus ended up building an operational relationship that went far beyond the simple formula of “**military assistance**”.

British special forces on the ground

Then there is the most opaque and sensitive chapter of the entire British presence: that of the **UK Special Forces**, the sector in which units like the SAS and SBS operate.

Here there is no need for speculation. Documents suffice.

In April 2023 a series of classified American military documents that ended up online, reconstructed by the **Guardian**, indicated the presence in Ukraine of **97 members of Western special forces** between February and March.

Of these, **50 were British**, more than half of the entire presence indicated in the documents and the largest Western contingent.

It is a fact that completely changes the perception of British involvement. London was not limited to providing weapons, training, and advice from the outside: **British special forces personnel were physically present on Ukrainian soil.**

The documents did not publicly attribute those 50 men to a specific unit, but the substantial fact remains: the United Kingdom had deployed to Ukraine a numerically significant UKSF presence, inserted into the heart of a war in which London was already playing a decisive role in training, intelligence, and planning.

And in a modern conflict, a presence of this kind is not measured solely in numbers of men.

It is measured above all in **transferred capabilities, planning, operational experience, and integration with intelligence.**

Can fifty men change a war?

Taken in isolation, fifty operators seem irrelevant in a war fought by hundreds of thousands of soldiers. But this is a wrong reading of special forces. An SAS operator is not deployed to replace an infantryman in a trench: a small team can train dozens or hundreds of men, assist in planning, develop procedures, transfer operational experience, and better integrate intelligence and action on the ground. This is the multiplier effect.

What matters is not how many Western men are on the ground. What matters is how many capabilities they can transfer to those fighting.

And it is precisely for this reason that the presence of British special forces, if placed within the broader framework of cooperation, takes on a completely different significance.

The SBS and Russian accusations

Moscow, of course, went much further.

In April 2024, the FSB directly accused the **British Special Boat Service** of having participated in the preparation of Ukrainian operations in the Black Sea.

According to Russian intelligence, SBS personnel allegedly assisted Ukrainian naval special forces.

Reuters reported the accusation, highlighting, however, a fundamental element: **the British government did not confirm those statements.**

The distinction is essential. The presence of UK Special Forces personnel is supported by leaked Western documents; the specific accusations about SBS operations, on the other hand, come from the Russian FSB and **cannot be treated as established facts**. It is a substantial difference on a journalistic level.

Yet London was on the ground

Other elements that emerged over the years nevertheless show that the British presence in Ukraine was not purely diplomatic.

In 2024, a confidential conversation between senior German military officers, intercepted and made public by Russia, contained references to Britain's role in assisting Ukraine in the use of long-range weapons systems.

The British government maintained its customary discretion on operational details, while the Guardian recalled that London had already acknowledged the presence of its own personnel in Ukraine to support the diplomatic mission and training activities.

Once again, the picture that emerges is not that of a British army openly engaged against Moscow, but of a presence made up of technicians, trainers, advisors, intelligence personnel, special forces, and planning. A structure deliberately kept below the threshold that would have formally transformed the Russian-Ukrainian war into a direct confrontation between Russia and

NATO.

Did Russia therefore fight against NATO?

No, and it is important to say this clearly. Russia fought and fights against **the Armed Forces of Ukraine**. It was the Ukrainians who suffered the losses, who defended Hostomel, Kyiv, Kharkiv, Mykolaiv, and the Donbass, who remained in the trenches and fought in armored vehicles.

Attributing Ukrainian resistance to the West would mean erasing the main factor of the war: **Ukraine's decision to fight**.

But it would be equally naive to tell the other half of the story as if it never existed.

Ukraine **did not fight alone from the technological, informational, and logistical point of view**.

Behind it was the most powerful military and intelligence infrastructure of the Western world.

The real Western weapon was not a missile

HIMARS, Storm Shadow, Patriot, NLAW, and ATACMS are the names that made the headlines. They are visible, photographable, quantifiable weapons.

But probably one of the most important weapons provided to Ukraine **did not have a warhead**.

It was information: knowing where the enemy is located, understanding their movements, identifying headquarters, reconstructing their communications, assessing their vulnerabilities, and understanding when they are preparing an offensive. Then connecting all of this to men and systems capable of transforming information into action.

An HIMARS battery without targets is just a launcher.

A Storm Shadow missile without intelligence is just a missile.

A special unit without information fights almost blind.

Intelligence transforms the weapon into capability.

Putin had predicted a war. Not this war

Russia had prepared the invasion of Ukraine by concentrating armies, missiles, aviation, airborne forces and special units. For months it had built the apparatus necessary for the attack.

But when it crossed the border it found itself facing something far more complex than a simple numerical comparison of armies could show.

Ahead were the Ukrainians. Behind them, years of Western training, satellites, analysts, Wiesbaden and coordination structures, the CIA and the British. And, in the gray zone surrounding one of the most monitored wars in modern history, **there were also men from British special forces.**

How many were SAS, how many SBS and what they actually did will probably remain classified for many years to come.

But the overall picture is now hard to ignore.

The war within the war

This is perhaps one of the most important lessons from Ukraine.

Modern wars are not fought only along the front line. Behind the visible one there exists a second one, made of sensors, satellites, servers, interceptions, operational centers, special forces, intelligence services, analysts and planners.

A war in which the distance between whoever gathers information and whoever destroys a target can span thousands of kilometers and several countries.

And it is precisely here that the CIA, the American military apparatus and British forces have had the greatest impact.

They did not fight the war in Ukraine's place. They did something militarily more sophisticated: **they helped Ukraine see first, understand first and, when possible, strike first.**

Against an opponent enormously superior in mass, means and firepower, this difference can mean survival.

And in February 2022, while in Moscow someone was probably imagining a rapid campaign against Kyiv, Russia discovered that behind the Ukrainian soldier there was not just Ukraine.

There was a machine built in the shadows for almost a decade.

And that machine was already running.

Main sources

- [**ABC News, January 17, 2025**](#) – reconstruction of the partnership between CIA and Ukrainian intelligence begun after 2014.
- [**The Times, April 11, 2025**](#) – reconstruction of the role of British military leadership, Tony Radakin, intelligence and planning with Kyiv and Washington.
- [**The Guardian, April 11, 2023**](#) – Pentagon leak documents indicating up to 50 members of UK Special Forces present in Ukraine.
- [**Reuters, April 11, 2024**](#) – FSB accusations regarding the involvement of the British Special Boat Service, unconfirmed by London.
- [**House of Commons Library / UK Government**](#) – timeline of British assistance and training to the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

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