Sudden Attack: About the Past or the Future?

Sudden Attack: The Ultimate Test of Intelligence and Leadership
by Uri Bar-Yosef
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480 pages [in Hebrew]

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In *Surprise Attack*, Uri Bar-Yosef returns to an issue that has engaged him in many of his books, namely, the collapse of warning systems in Israel and the personal responsibility, as he sees it, of the heads of the intelligence community for the lapse. In addition to the Yom Kippur War, about which he has written previously, here he examines, in his fluent and wide-ranging style, other familiar surprise attacks in the 20th century: Operation Barbarossa (the German invasion of Russia in the Second World War) and the Korean War.

In the first part of the book, which presents a theoretical and historical framework on the nature of surprise attacks in the 20th century, the author searches for the causes of the event—be they intelligence (lack of information or lack of understanding); personal; group; or organizational factors—whereby the attacked side was unprepared. The second part is devoted to the three said events that marked a failure on the part of those surprised on the battlefield. The analysis of each event proceeds in the same way: the decision to launch the attack; a description of the preparations; the extent of the threat that the attack represented for the victims; the information received by the victim about the intention and the preparations; and the victim's processes of evaluation and decision making.

A surprise attack is an astonishing event, and not just a surprise, in which one side in a strategic situation suddenly understands that it has acted on the basis of a mistaken perception of the threat from the other side. When the astonishment involves heavy losses, the result is national trauma for many years. This was the case of the surprise on Yom Kippur 1973, when there was a sharp transition from the sense of confidence and arrogance in Israel that followed the Six Day War, to a sense of fear and the loss of national security, and concern for the future of "the Third Temple." Successful surprise attacks paralyze the enemy and shatter the equilibrium of decision makers. Sometimes they confound the victim's ability to learn, so that it is unable to recover and lose the campaign. However, this book presents cases where the surprised side managed to learn important lessons, overcome the surprise, and eventually win the campaign.

According to Bar-Yosef, the failure of early warning often has its roots in conscious actions by the heads of intelligence organizations. For example, he argues that Eli Zeira, head of intelligence in the Yom Kippur War, misled the political leadership by not telling them about the non-activation of "special measures" for gathering intelligence. By contrast, Charles Willoughby, General MacArthur's head of intelligence in the Korean War, adjusted his assessment to the policy of his commander. The question that occupies Bar-Yosef is, what motivates the people involved—political and military leaders, intelligence personnel—and why do they refuse to recognize a change in the situation.

The human element plays a central role in the book, and Bar-Yosef makes use of a

The Korean War: The North Korean invasion and the Chinese invasion of South Korea (1950)

Source: Encyclopedia Britannica, https://www.britannica.com/event/Korean-War/Back-to-the-38th-parallel

comprehensive review of the literature to perform a "psychological analysis" of key figures who, he believes, had it within their power to prevent the surprise attacks. In this framework he analyzes their personality and family structure, their attitude toward other leaders (Stalin believed Hitler and identified with him, because he resembled him), and the history of their close family (MacArthur was deeply affected by the fact that his father did not become chief of staff). A large portion of the book, perhaps too much, is devoted to analyses of the personalities and characteristics of the leaders—such as paranoia, conspiratorial thinking in Stalin, and arrogance and impatience in Zeira in comparison to his predecessor Aharon Yariv, who nurtured research officers, guided them to act with caution, and encouraged them to recognize and examine their mistakes.

According to Bar-Yosef, most of the surprises discussed in the book were not due to failures of systems such as inadequate intelligence organizations, inability to gather information, or armies that were not properly prepared for war, but due to one or two people (usually a political or military leader acting with an intelligence figure) who estimated that the enemy would not attack and retained this preconception, even when it was no longer relevant.

However, this analysis leaves an uncomfortable feeling, apart from the fact that the writers on whom Bar-Yosef bases his book have not performed any psychological analysis of the leaders and intelligence figures. The question arises whether it is possible to use the same personality traits to explain conflicting actions (in the case of Stalin, for example, his scorn for intelligence, and after he was surprised—his eagerness to listen to the intelligence). Moreover, over-emphasis on the human dimension reduces the attention paid to aspects of perception, such as the lack of understanding of Egyptian perceptions in the Yom Kippur War as a conceptual underpinning that necessarily led to failure.

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as social pressure) and organizational aspects (such as compartmentalization, lack of pluralism, and internal power struggles), but the main emphasis is on the failure of senior personnel. For example, the power of denial of signs that conflict with preconceptions can be seen in the seizure of invading patrols, in Russia or Sinai. Although the interrogation of the captured soldiers clearly indicated that war was imminent, this was seen (by Stalin or Zeira) as deception or provocation, and they refused to recognize a significant change in the actual situation, which should have led to a reassessment of the intelligence. Another factor is individual initiative that in Bar-Yosef's view led to a destructive outcome: here, for example, he refers to Zeira's decision not to activate the "special measures" and not to report this, and also to Willoughby's decision not to involve intelligence personnel in the interrogation of captives. Zeira's explanation, that the decision not to report was based on his concept of command ("what is my responsibility I don't pass on to my superior officers") is not acceptable to Bar-Yosef. On the other hand, Zeira does not consider the importance of dialogue between leaders as a basis for deciding policy, an approach that has taken root in the IDF in recent decades.

There is tension between policy and intelligence. In both Operation Barbarossa and in the Yom Kippur War there was concern that raising alertness or shooting down the enemy's aerial reconnaissance sorties (in Russia) could lead to escalation, and therefore the victim of the surprise attack, the side that did not want war, avoids adopting intelligence assessments that would necessarily lead to escalation. This is the gap between an intelligence error and a policy that may be mistaken but is legitimate. For example, this was possibly the logic behind Stalin's aim to postpone war with Germany as long as possible, because he did not rely on the Red Army and wanted to give it time to recover, so he therefore preferred not to accept the intelligence assessments. In this

Operation Barbarossa – German attack on the Soviet Union (1941)

Source: R. Zuljan, 2018, Map of Operation Barbarossa, June 21 – September 1, 1941, https://www.onwar.com/wwii/maps/efront/05efront.html

context, he recalls the words of Russian Foreign Minister Molotov: "They accuse us of ignoring the intelligence, yes, they warned us, but if we had listened to them, we would have given Hitler an excuse to attack us sooner. We knew that war would soon break out and that we were weaker than Germany. We did everything we could to delay the war, and we succeeded."

Running through the book is a clear preference for information over assessment. Bar-Yosef glorifies the intelligence gatherers unit (in Israel, Zvi Zamir, head of the Mossad, and Yoel Ben-Porat, commander of the Sigint Unit) compared to the researchers (led by Eli Zeira and Yona Bandman), and this reflects a preference for facts over research assessment. While the North Korean invasion to conquer the peninsula indicates the difficulty of human intelligence to penetrate a closed dictatorial regime (then as now), it seems that the failure in the strategic assessment of relations in the Soviet Union-China-North Korea triangle indicates a failure of perception. According to American intelligence, Stalin, and not the

North Korean leader, was the triangle's center of gravity, and therefore if the Soviets were not interested in getting involved in a war (before their nuclear arsenal was ready), then a North Korean invasion was unlikely. From this we can learn that reliance on intelligence gathering, however good, does not grant immunity from mistaken preconceptions, and the dependence on intelligence gathering was problematic. There was no sign of information, however classified, that provided an understanding of the nature of strategic relations within the triangle, and therefore abstract understanding was required. Understanding is at the heart of strategic research.

In the wars and conflicts of recent decades, Israel did not need an early warning of sudden enemy attacks because the conflicts were initiated by Israel. The definition of warning of a surprise military attack, which Bar-Yosef treats as the main function of intelligence, seems less relevant in times of regional upheaval, the rise and fall of ISIS, the field of cyber warfare, disinformation campaigns, and the subversion of democratic governments, and all this when the Syrian army is not expected to initiate a surprise attack on Israel, strategic relations with Egypt are strong, and foreseeable wars will involve (precision) missiles, rounds of rocket firing, and the "campaign between wars."

Bar-Yosef attaches great importance to individual and organizational abilities to learn as the basis for ultimate victory. On the one hand, he presents Stalin in Operation Barbarossa, who changed his attitude after the surprise, and began to relate more openly to his generals, and this led, inter alia, to victory in the campaign for Moscow. On the other hand, he describes the IDF as apparently a learning system, although in fact he only mentions the central role played by Zamir, and how Zeira was pushed out of the decision making circle. It is not clear how tactical learning by the Armored Corps from dealing with Sagger anti-tank rockets, as described in the book, helped—if at all—in the strategic learning that was required by the Israeli security system.

In addition to the analysis of test cases, the book includes a review of surprise attacks in the 20th century, at the outbreak of hostilities and during the fighting. The question arises whether it is correct to describe attacks in the course of conflict as strategic surprise attacks, when all systems are alert and prepared so that the surprise, if any, is tactical or operational, but certainly not strategic. The review appears to describe history rather than any future threat. It is not by chance that the historical review ends with the attack on the Twin Towers in New York on September 11, 2001, as an unprecedented and different type of surprise attack. However, the reference to Russian interference in the United States presidential elections in 2016 does not seem to fit the concept of a sudden attack.

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Bar-Yosef's book examines the test cases that shaped the 20th century mainly from a personal point of view, so that it could almost be called "A Personal Surprise Attack." He presents, with the wisdom of hindsight, strategic errors by military and political leaders and intelligence organizations, but is not convincing in his claim that these were unavoidable errors due to their personalities, since everyone involved wanted to succeed and win. Even if some had narcissistic or paranoid personality traits, in

Egyptian attack in the Yom Kippur War, October 1973

other cases such traits did not prevent them from succeeding in a campaign or in assessing intelligence. Moreover, he inevitably plays down their part in the failure of the whole intelligence system and its internal processes, and vis-à-vis the political echelon.

Is this a book about the past or the future? The reader is left with no answer to this question or the question of whether the surprise attacks described in detail in the book are characteristic of the challenges of the last century, or can teach us about the challenges of the next century. From an Israeli point of view, it appears that the main threats facing us at present are those of an enemy that can disappear underground or under cover of civilians, and the intelligence challenge is to reveal them quickly and accurately. It also seems that humanity as a whole is facing new global threats such as climate change, pandemics (like the coronavirus), and demographic changes, and the intelligence community must address them because they are a challenge to national security in the broadest sense, rather than focusing purely on military threats.

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