HISTORIA MILITAR revista digital

# INTELLIGENCE DURING THE CAMPAIGN OF THE TEN THOUSAND

Jonathan Dowdall

The literary account of the campaign of the Ten Thousand in 401 B.C.E by Xenophon of Athens,[1] 'stands out as our fullest account of an extended campaign by a Greek.'[2] It also provides an insightful illustration of the intelligence issues that faced an ancient force on campaign. Reliable intelligence has always been a central part of successful military operations. This is because 'an army in the field needs intelligence in order to be able to build up a picture of its own situation and operations in relation to those of its opponents.'[3] Intelligence 'power' (as Herman characterises it) is a military force of considerable value.[4] This is even more relevant in the ancient world, where formal intelligence processes in the modern sense were absent, and intelligence was a fundamentally short ranged and ad hoc affair.[5] This study will illustrate the complete lack of reliable political intelligence that provided the con text for the March of the Ten Thousand, and how an intelligence disparity between attacker and defender contributed to the events at Cunaxa. However, it will also highlight the active processes of deduction and observation in the area's of strategic, logistical and tactical intelligence that turned a disastrous situation into one of the most famous stories of survival in ancient history.

Whilst Xenophon's narrative during the inward journey is not as richly illustrated as his outward account, it is at this early stage that the background intelligence situation is laid out, and the most decisive and far reaching effect of unreliable intelligence on the campaign is established. When Xenophon joined ten thousand of his fellow Greek mercenaries to serve Cyrus the Younger[6], they already suffered from a fundamental lack of political intelligence. Political knowledge of potential enemies' intentions and dispositions would normally inform 'the conduct and direction of a whole campaign in a region or theatre of war.' [7] However, when the Ten Thousand set out from Sardis they were still being led to believe by Cyrus that their intention was to engage the Pisidians.[8] Even once the true intentions of the march became clear the Greeks

[1] Xenophon was a Greek mercenary, historian and philosopher who lived between 430-354 B.C.E. His account of this campaign, the *Anabasis*, is widely held to be one of the most important first hand accounts of warfare in the ancient world. For more information about this author, see, Tuplin, Christopher, Ed. (2004) *Xenophon and His World* (Stuttgart, Franz Steiner)
[2] Whitby, found in Fox, Lane (2004), *The Long March: Xenophon and the Ten Thousand* (Yale University Press), p. 216
[3] Austin, N & Ranvok, R (1995), *Exploratio* (London, Routledge), p. 6
[4] Herman, Michael. (1996), *Intelligence Power in Peace and War* (Cambridge University Press), p. 146
[5] Austin & Rankov (2004), p. 6
[6] Cyrus the Younger was a Persian prince, brother to the king, satrap holder and general. The opening lines of the *Anabasis* describe how Cyrus fell out of favour with his brother, the King of Persia, Artaxerxes. He thus assembled an army 'in secret' to 'become king in his brothers place.' (I.I)
[7] Austin & Rankov (2004), p. 12
[8] Warner, Rex; Trans. (1986), *Xenophon: The Persian Expedition* (London, Penguin Books), p.58 (I.II) (henceforth "*Anabasis*")

continued inward due to the mixed incentives of obligation and reward, as well as the lack of viable exit routes without Persian guides, and not an intelligence revelation.[9] As will be seen later, issues of acquiring political intelligence would have far reaching consequences for the Ten Thousand, as they were entering a foreign land with no prior knowledge of the political situation they would face.

It was also at Sardis that the next important intelligence issue for the inward march was to manifest itself; the disparity of intelligence between the two sides. Xenophon asserts that one of the Persian Empire's biggest weaknesses was its poor 'length ended communications,' indicating he believed that the Persian's struggled to transmit military information over long distances rapidly. [10] It is on these grounds that he emphasises that Cyrus was attempting to move as quickly as possible to catch his brother unawares. Yet in reality Artaxerxes was informed of the advancing force by Tissaphernes[11] and his cavalry soon after Cyrus set off for the interior.[12] Indeed, given the irregular advance rates of Cyrus' army until it had passed the Syrian Gates it would seem fair to say that Artaxerxes was given ample warning of the army's coming, despite Xenophons postulation to the contrary.[13]

This intelligence advantage of the defending force was never mitigated. Upon entering Babylonia itself the Greeks came across 'hoof marks and the droppings' of some 'two thousand cavalry.'[14] This would indicate that Cyrus's army was being kept under surveillance by a superior cavalry force.[15] Cyrus however was constrained by a lack of trust-worthy cavalry to counter this threat. Indeed the untrustworthy political allegiance of his troops, as illustrated by the attempted betrayal of Orontas, made splitting up his force for reconnaissance purposes dangerous to his army.[16] Meanwhile, deserters from the kings army were being found along the route, and their interrogation confirmed that Artxerxes had assembled an army to meet Cyrus in battle.[17] This created one concrete assertion amidst the numerous intelligence uncertainties, that 'I (Cyrus) shall not gain power without fighting for it'.[18] Artaxerxes intended to fight, the remaining intelligence questions were when and where.

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[9] *Ibid*, pp. 65-69 (I.III)
[10] *Anabasis* (1986), p.77 (I.V)
[11] Tissaphernes was a Persian nobleman and cavalry commander loyal to Artaxerxes. He appears to have been Artaxerxes' favoured general, as he was entrusted with negotiating with the Greeks after Cunaxa.
[12] *Anabasis* (1986), p.59 (I.II)
[13] The chapter entitled *The March from Sardis to Tarsus*, details prolonged pauses in the armies march, with the most extreme case being a wait of an entire month at the citadel of Celaenae. *Ibid*, pp. 58-64 (I.V)
[14] *Ibid*, p. 79 (I.VI)
[15] Sabin, Philip (2007), *Lost Battles: Reconstructing the Great Clashes of the Ancient World* (London, Hambledon Contiuum), p. 108
[16] Orontas was a Persian nobleman and cavalry commander who served Cyrus. His attempted defection to the loyalists with 1,000 horseman, and his subsequent execution, is detailed in the *Anabasis* (1986), pp. 79-81 (I.VI)
[17] Xenophon is frustratingly vague about what kind of information the deserters provided, but Cyrus clearly felt their testimony was accurate enough to act upon, as he immediately prepared for battle. *Ibid,* p. 82 (I.VII
[18] *Ibid,* p. 83 (I.VII)

Yet once again Cyrus and the Ten Thousand were at a disadvantage in this regard in the run up to the battle of Cunaxa. The army had initially advanced 'under arms', expecting contact at any moment.[19] However, when they came across a strong defensive position near the Median wall that was unguarded it was concluded that Ataxerxes 'had given up the idea of fighting.'[20] This belief, and the lack of intelligence to the contrary for the reasons mentioned, led to the army moving 'forward with less caution' and in 'no sort of order.'[21] Needless to say it was this mistake which fed the 'considerable confusion' when the King's army unexpectedly appeared in battle formation ahead of them as Cunaxa began.[22] The resulting mixture of startlingly un-opposed Greek successes and overwhelming strategic failure with the death of Cyrus was debated as hotly by ancient historians as today.[23] The argument that poor intelligence was a factor in the disaster at Cunaxa requires the weighing up how severe the confusion caused by the intelligence blunder actually was.

Xenophon states that the left flank of the force was imperilled because the loyalist centre lay 'beyond Cyrus' left wing' and was thus overlapping it.[24] This either implies a vastly superior force in numbers or, as some modern historians such as Anderson and Nelson have suggested, that Cyrus' army was still in 'a long and disorganised column' after the intelligence blunder.[25] It must be remembered that forces marching in column could extend back over several miles, meaning an unexpected engagement could be brought against the head of an army whilst the rear was still many hours march away. The gradual feeding in of troops as they arrive from the rear that would occur in such a situation aptly matches the type of battle Xenophon describes, with his allusions to their formations being 'continually coming up' even as the paean was sung.[26] As this intelligence blunder affected the military effectiveness of the force, it is clear that the lack of viable intelligence contributed directly to Cyrus being overwhelmed in the centre, despite the Greek success on the right flank. His death was to be the decisive factor in the battle due to the political situation it created, so we can conclusively argue that intelligence factors led to the disaster at Cunaxa.

With Cyrus dead, Xenophon opens a new chapter entitled *The Greeks Are Isolated*. This statement certainly summarises in stark terms the intelligence issues that now faced the Greek mercenaries. They were in the middle of a 'formidable and quite un-known' land, surrounded by 'territory that no Greek is likely to have crossed before.'[27] Persia was 'shrouded in myth' to a Greek world whose geographical knowledge of the East was limited to the ports of Asia Minor.[28] In short, they knew nothing about 'the overall climate, geography, and agricultural resources of the opponent's country' which might have helped inform their decision making process

[19] *Ibid*, p. 83 (I.VII)
[20] *Ibid*, p. 85 (I.VII)
[21] *Anabasis* (1986), p. 85 (I.VII)
[22] *Ibid*, p.86 (I.VIII)
[23] For the debate between Diodorus, Plutarch and Xenophons depictions, see Whitby, found in Fox (2004), p. 226
[24] *Anabasis* (1986), p. 87 (I.VIII)
[25] Sabin (2007), p. 109
[26] *Anabasis* (1986), p. 89 (I.VIII)
[27] Fox (2004), p. 125
[28] Hutchinson, Godfrey (2000), *Xenophon and the Art of Command* (London, Greenhill Books), p. 31

after Cunaxa.[29] It is in this context that we are given the narrative from the Ten Thousand's perspective, as it is also at this stage that Xenophon begins to discuss events from his personal viewpoint. Intelligence issues were to be of vital significance for the outward journey, the famous March of the Ten Thousand

It has already been stated that the campaign had began in the context of an intelligence vacuum for the Greeks, and it was this lack of intelligence that would be their first and most pressing concern after Cunaxa. After recovering from the shock of being approached as the vanquished rather then 'conquerors', the Greeks quickly negotiated a truce with Artaxerxes.[30] Xenophon implies that this negotiation with Artaxerxes was undertaken because the King was 'terrified' of the Greek's fighting prowess at Cunaxa.[31] Yet it seems more likely that the Persians merely wished to deal with the sizeable Greek force as easily as possible, and were simply buying themselves time to this end.[32] Indeed, giving their clear inability to tackle the Greeks in open battle, and their subsequent resort to betrayals and skirmishes, a consistent policy of attacking the Greeks at minimum risk to themselves characterises the Persian military tactics during the Ten Thousands outward march.

This understanding of events compliments the host of contradictory advice offered to the Greeks during the proceeding 'March of Mutual Suspicion', which further illustrates the dire consequences of a strategic intelligence asymmetry.[33] Both local farmers and the Persian army were attempting to force the Greeks to make a quick decision whilst 'disturbed and alarmed', in the hope they would blunder into a disadvantageous position.[34] It was this lack of political intelligence that allowed Tissaphernes to murder the Ten Thousand's five nominated generals, who were ambushed and beheaded by the Persians during a negotiation session.[35] Later on the supposed friendship of Mithridates[36] meant the Greeks 'suffered badly' in a similar ambush.[37]

Reliable intelligence was thus impossible to come by from the capricious Persians, and it was only when Xenophon seized the initiative that these political intelligence issues finally diminished in importance. By asserting that the Greeks would have to aggressively fight their way out of Persia, Xenophon was also assuring the Greeks were no longer going to negotiate or co-operate with any locals in a manner which would put them at risk. Thus, Xenophon set the Greeks towards a strategic goal which was less vulnerable to intelligence manipulation from the outside.[38] With this new

[29] Engels, D. (1978), 'Alexander's Intelligence System', *Classics Quarterly*, Vol. 30, p. 328
[30] *Anabasis* (1986), p. 104 (II.I)
[31] *Ibid*, p. 106 (II.III)
[32] Hutchinson (2000), p. 43
[33] *Anabasis* (1986), p. 117 (II.IV)
[34] *Ibid*, p. 120 (II.IV)
[35] *Ibid*, p. 124 (II.V)
[36] Mithridates was a Persian nobleman and cavalry commander loyal to Cyrus, but who defected to Artaxerxes in the aftermath of Cunaxa. Due to the fact that he 'had been most in Cyrus' confidence', the Greeks mistakenly presumed he would deal with them honestly, a trust he was to exploit to military advantage. *Ibid*, p. 128 (II.V)
[37] *Ibid*, p. 159 (III.III)
[38] *Ibid*, p. 170 (III.III)

strategic clarity, the Greeks eventually decided to leave Persia via a northern route, and an intelligence assessment of this decision sheds some interesting light on the campaign's progress.

At face value the decision to leave Persia by heading north seems to be based upon a rather 'in-auspicious' idea; that rivers can be more easily forded nearer to their source, and that they could follow the banks of the Tigris.[39] Indeed the rest of Xenophon's speech on this subject is dedicated to morale raising assessment of their chances rather then an overview of their topographical knowledge. However, such a choice might seem ill advised. Their chosen route would lead them through the barren mountains of Armenia in the middle of winter. This decision was to cost many of the Greeks their lives to adverse weather conditions and the 'bulimia' (frostbite) which overcame 'a number of the soldiers.'[40] The question must therefore be; to what extent was the choice to go north due to a fear of military destruction rather then a topographical intelligence analysis?

The military threat was certainly a great one. Phalinus had warned the Greeks during the truce that they were 'in his (Artaxerxes) power, since he has got you in the middle of his territory, surrounded by… his armies.'[41] The Greeks had not wandered blindfolded into Persia, and would have been well aware of the plains and tight mountain passes which had marked their inward journey. On the face of it then, fear of attack and desperation may indeed have coloured Xenophons choice of route. It would certainly explain his obsession with river crossings, the most viable point for being attacked. Furthermore, the Greeks actually appeared to be ignorant of what lay north. It was only when they arrived between 'the Tigris and the mountains' that they gathered together their 'prisoners and questioned them in detail about the country around them.'[42] This would seem to indicate that the Greeks were not particularly aware of the nature of the Armenian mountains before they arrived at their feet, inferring that topographical ignorance informed their choice as much as military desperation.

Moreover, whilst it is pointless to hypothesise the abstract understandings of ancient Greek geography, it would be clear that an intelligent observer like Xenophon would have known that the Black Sea ran along the northern coast of Asia Minor. Would he not have also known that it was regularly and safely traversed by Greek ships, as this is exactly the form of aid he seeks when they arrive there?[43] An even-handed answer must account for elements of both arguments. As such, it should be said that the decision to go north was informed by a mixture of topographical reasoning and the militarily prudent decision to avoid being trapped at river crossings. With this element of strategic intelligence covered, there are now two areas that require further attention, logistical and tactical intelligence.

[39] Anderson, J. (1974), *Xenophon – Classical Life and Letters* (Duckworth), p. 132
[40] *Anabasis* (1986), p. 197 (IV.V)
[41] *Ibid*, p. 105 (II.I)
[42] *Anabasis* (1986), p. 105 (III.IV)
[43] *Ibid*, p. 222 (V.I)

The principal intelligence tool for securing logistical supply was the 'constant use of guides and local informants, willing or coerced.'[44] We know that the Greeks were already employing their own guides during the treacherous march, and as Xenophon does not say otherwise, we can assume he retained them during the march along the Tigris.[45] Xenophon was confident that his guides would take them to safe sources of supply, asserting they would not starve.[46] Indeed at this stage he speaks often about 'plenty of provisions,' vindicating his bold decision to burn the heavy baggage at the outset of their march.[47]

However as already mentioned these guides were either lost or proved ignorant of the Armenian mountains, and during this stage of the march we see a sharp contrast in terms of logistical intelligence. The Greeks appear at several stages to be marching with no local knowledge whatsoever. It was thus during this stage of the march that Xenophon speaks of people dying by the roadside from exposure and starvation.[48] A previously unseen brutality overcame Xenophon when dealing with two potential informers during this part of the march, further illustrating a degree of heightened anxiety of food supplies.[49]

It is difficult to assess to what extent the Greeks were desperate, but it seems certain that the way Chirisophus casually 'came to a village' and met 'some women and girls', was not a deliberate encounter but a fortunate blunder.[50] The Greeks were probably on the verge of disaster. However, the encounter was to be decisive as the Ten Thousand proceeded to kidnap the 'head-men… for a guide.'[51] The importance of this guide is surely illustrated by the fight Chirisophus and Xenophon had over the treatment of one of the kidnapped men, another example of the treatment of guides varying on their Greek's degree of desperation.[52] However, after this episode Xenophon does not reference any severe suffering in terms of logtsics. The conclusion must be that as long as the Greeks had a local guide logistical supplies could easily be located and seized with their superior force of arms.

This superior force was also affected by intelligence issues, the 'problem of how to find the enemy and face them' which tactical intelligence addresses.[53] Ancient tactical information generally had an 'immediate, short term use only,' and is thus reliant on a quick witted and able commander to exploit it.[54] The Greeks did not start off well in this respect, as the pitiful two and a half mile advance rate of the first day illustrates.[55] They were facing tactics and weapons unfamiliar to them, and the frustration and

[44] Hutchinson (2000), p. 57
[45] *Anabasis* (1986), p. 118 (II.IV)
[46] *Ibid*, p. 154 (III.II)
[47] *Ibid*, p. 186 (IV.III)
[48] *Anabasis* (1986), p. 197 (IV.V)
[49] In a relatively uncharacteristic show of cruelty, Xenophon kills one of a pair of captured men whilst the other watches, hoping to force co-operation and information from the survivor. *Ibid*, p.180 (IV,I)
[50] *Ibid*, p. 197 (IV.V)
[51] *Ibid,* p. 202 (IV.VI)
[52] *Ibid,* p. 202 (IV.VI)
[53] Austin & Rankov (1995), p. 39
[54] Hutchinson (2000), p. 68
[55] *Anabasis* (1986), p. 157 (III.III)

danger this caused can easily be seen in Xenophon's account; *The Greeks Suffer From Slings and Arrows*.[56] Similar problems of tactical unfamiliarity were combined with adverse terrain in the mountains, where constant ambushes threatened to slow the Greeks down to a crawl.[57] Two distinct intelligence methods can be noted as bringing an end to these problems.

The first is Autopsy, the 'personal observation by a commander… and the ability to make use of the results.'[58] This intelligence process can be seen most acutely in the rapid response to the Persian attacks on the plains. Xenophon decided to raise 'two hundred slingers' and some makeshift cavalry so as to facilitate a more flexible, light infantry based reaction to the Persian tactics.[59] The result was an almost instantaneous turn of fortunes in the next skirmish. Observing the Persian campfires also led Xenophon to assert that the 'Persian army is useless by night', before stealing a night march with this knowledge in mind.[60] Similarly in the mountains Xenophon quickly grasps by observation that even when the natives held the high ground they tended to give way when approached rapidly by heavy infantry. His speech on this matter states how they will 'steal this ground from them' with all the confidence of a general who has gauged the will of his adversary, and found it lacking.[61]

The second tactical intelligence method employed by the Ten Thousand was a more general ability to exploit advantageous tactical data via a policy of 'open access to all comers.'[62] Xenophon explicitly says that 'everyone knew it was permissible to come to him' with information or ideas that 'had a bearing on the fighting.'[63] An example of such fortuitous information came from two young hoplites that chanced upon a river crossing, facilitating the rapid manoeuvre against Orontas' mercenaries in Armenia.[64] Whilst there are few other direct references, such an "open door" intelligence policy was bound to reap multiple tactical rewards, reminding us never to disregard 'the importance of fortuitous and advantageous' intelligence occurrences in war.[65]

In conclusion, the march into and out of Persia by the Ten Thousand was affected from the outset by a lack of reliable political intelligence, as illustrated by the various political uncertainties in the early stages of Xenophons account. The intelligence disparity between the forces of Cyrus and Artaxerxes has also been shown to be instrumental in the disaster at Cunaxa. Later, a complete lack of knowledge of Persia's geography and military power was overcome by astute military decision-making and rough geographical estimates, whilst logistical issues were generally only severe when guides were not forthcoming. Meanwhile, throughout the march an active process of autopsy allowed the Ten Thousand to adapt to unusual and harsh tactical challenges. Issues of reliable information and intelligence fundamentally

[56] *Ibid*, pp. 157-160 (III.III)
[57] *Ibid*, p.182 (IV.II)
[58] Austin & Rankov (1995), p. 60
[59] *Anabasis* (1986), p. 162 (III.IV)
[60] *Anabasis* (1986), p. 167 (III.IV)
[61] *Ibid*, p. 204 (IV.VI)
[62] Hutchinson (2000), p. 68
[63] *Anabasis* (1986), p. 187 (IV.III)
[64] *Ibid*, p. 188 (IV.III)
[65] Austin & Rankov (1995), p. 34

shaped the March of the Ten Thousand, but in the end it was tactical flexibility and sheer determination that allowed the Greeks to fight their way to safety against all the odds.