



SECRET INTELLIGENCE IN THE EUROPEAN STATES SYSTEM, 1918-1989

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Introduction

The Role of Secret Intelligence in the International Relations of Europe in the Twentieth Century

Jonathan Haslam and Karina Urbach

This book takes a look at the role of secret intelligence in the history of the European states system of the twentieth century. The reader may reasonably object that this has been done before. The last serious attempt, *Knowing One's Enemies: Intelligence Assessment Before the Two World Wars*, edited by Harvard's Ernest R. May, appeared some thirty years ago, however, and it was necessarily restricted in scope because of the absence of solid documentation for the Cold War. May later despaired that his book was scarcely ever cited, that the revolution in intelligence studies was largely self-contained, and that it had not had much effect outside its own inner circle.

If this is true, something can be said for another attempt, and one that reaches into the Cold War. Although limited in impact, three decades of further research have greatly advanced our understanding of intelligence history. Specialist journals have become well established; work of real value has appeared. Traditional perspectives have given ground, and judgments have been revised in the light of new evidence. Progress has nonetheless inevitably been limited. Direct access to the entire torso of secret intelligence, rather than choice cuts, is still well beyond reach.

Yet even though access to information is incomplete, one is struck by just how much attention the history receives from major intelligence agencies: the SVR (Sluzhba Vneshney Razvedki, or Foreign Intelligence Service, the KGB's successor operating abroad) and the CIA both have websites of some significance devoted to the subject. And both MI5 and MI6, neither noted

for openness, have published official histories (that of the former is infinitely better than that of the latter).¹ Whether this degree of attention arises from understanding the relevance of intelligence history to current and future needs or from a self-conscious preoccupation with institutional reputation is a moot point; possibly both. Intelligence releases at times appear to represent a continuation of secret warfare by other means. To the detriment of scholarship worldwide, the untrammelled capacity to withhold information is a crucial weapon in the armories of the great powers.

How and when did all this start? The unclassified study of intelligence history originated, against all the odds, with committed amateurs on both sides of the Atlantic: notably the American journalist David Kahn and the British historian of French diplomacy Christopher Andrew, alike preoccupied with decryption. Both initially drew active encouragement from Sir Harry Hinsley after performing at his legendary seminar at St John's College, Cambridge, during 1974–1975. And it was not long before others also took a keen interest, including May, who had long acted discreetly for the U.S. government in such matters.

A curious but fruitful result was the coincidental appearance in 1984 of both *The Missing Dimension: Governments and Intelligence Communities in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Christopher Andrew and David Dilks in Britain, and *Knowing One's Enemies: Intelligence Assessment Before the Two World Wars*, edited by Ernest May in the United States. Of the two, May's was undoubtedly the richer and has had the longest shelf-life because of its coherence.

Yet for all of the coverage that *Knowing One's Enemies* undoubtedly obtained, and the mass of recruits subsequently taking up the subject of intelligence history, exposure of this missing dimension was never welcomed universally. For some, no sacrifice was entailed. May's career had already peaked. Andrew's had not, however. Arguably, it took longer to do so for the very reason that he championed intelligence history with undaunted energy and enthusiasm. The situation that arose was not unlike that in sixteenth-century Europe. In those turbulent days, undesirable public attention to the secrets contained in reasons of state was priggishly compared to tastelessly exposing the pudenda of a woman. But in our case the missing dimension has not so much aroused moral outrage so much as "sniffy" indifference among more orthodox historians.

The critics may nonetheless have had a point. In common with reasons of state, the history of intelligence has undoubtedly suffered from excessive

claims for its capacity to explain. And the ambitious academic is all too tempted to see the only sources available—few and far between—as necessarily good sources. All too often, intelligence sources have been seized upon with alacrity but uncritically by those without sufficient knowledge and attention to the wider diplomatic and sociocultural context, the exploration of which is itself a massive task, beyond the skills of most enthusiasts.

Intelligence history has arguably failed to integrate itself into the mainstream by not taking diplomatic and military history sufficiently seriously on their own terms. The study of intelligence history is, after all, no less dependent on a direct understanding of foreign countries and access to their culture than is the history of international relations as a whole, and that requires competence in foreign languages and a firsthand understanding of how other societies work. These have been at a premium since the passing of the World War II generation of professors, with their linguistic expertise and life experience overseas.

Youthful scholars are temperamentally averse to devoting sufficient time in appropriate training to acquire the tools that would ultimately give their research true meaning. Moreover, the general run of international relations history and, indeed, military history by comparison appears a good deal less interesting; staid, indeed; certainly less exotic, some—most social historians we know—would say boring.

Simplistic reductions of diplomatic history to ready-made formulae are all too familiar among incautious political scientists indifferent to and ignorant of the texture of the past. The reduction of international relations history to intelligence history is equally distorting. The appropriate diplomatic backdrop against which intelligence history can be portrayed is vital—even if only in faint but accurate silhouette. By this alone can its value be judged. Without it, the intelligence product, once acquired with so much ingenuity and at times in great peril, may by virtue of the unusual status attached to it receive more importance than it would otherwise merit.

If true in general, this danger is even more real in the case of the twentieth century, a fascinating but challenging era. For the historian, the inherent complexity of its international relations has been compounded by a torrent of once secret documentation on all sides. The accessibility of archival sources has expanded at an ever greater pace since the 1960s. The opening of top secret documents following the fall of Communism in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 turned a swelling stream into a veritable flood.

Undeterred because largely ignorant, many have been drawn to this recondite world despite rather than because of the novelist John le Carré and his much publicized moral misgivings, as though in search of an alternative vocation to be experienced vicariously through the safety of the text, rather than the precarious reality of life as a spy or the choice of life behind a desk in the backrooms of public service. Secret intelligence and its acquisition are, after all, more often humdrum prose than inspirational poetry.

Ignorant of this core truth, isolated from the mainstream, and contrary to May's initial fears, some enthusiasts, undaunted by its inherent limitations, have threatened to turn the once "missing dimension" into the dominant, over-determining dimension; indulging it excessively as though to compensate for former neglect, yet all too often basing assertion on thin evidence or unearthing reams of detail from available archives (one thinks in particular of the East German collection) of remote interest to anybody.

An innovation such as intelligence history will undoubtedly attract more than a fair degree of attention among the public, not least because it sells books (except in today's Russia). It also exerts a spellbinding effect on those naturally attracted to the excitement of thrillers and novelty for its own sake. Here, of course, academics are no different from anyone else. The glittering prospect of a sensationalist discovery somehow seems more likely in the field of secret intelligence than in the case of day-to-day diplomacy; but, as the forty-niners discovered in California, fools' gold can be found in abundance by the impatient and untutored eye. The late Bill Odom, head of the National Security Agency under U.S. President Ronald Reagan, liked to tell the following joke:

A balloonist had lost his way and lowered his balloon to try to reorient himself by taking a closer look at the ground. Still disoriented, he dropped down farther in order to ask someone on the ground. He spotted a man on a bicycle and yelled to him, "Where am I?" The cyclist stopped, looked up in puzzlement, and answered, "You're in a balloon." The balloonist replied, "But more precisely, where am I?" The cyclist answered, "In a basket under a balloon." Frustrated by these evasive answers, he reversed this question and asked, "Where are you?" The cyclist replied, "On a bicycle." Exasperated, the balloonist reacted, "You must be an intelligence officer." The cyclist was now puzzled and asked, "How did you know?" The balloonist said, "You give accurate but useless answers to my questions." The history of intelligence, therefore, must be the record of accurate and but useless answers to ambiguous questions about the adversary.²

Beyond the world of academia and in the secret world, the separation of collection from analysis has proved a vital safeguard against temptation. That, of course, cannot be true of historians, who have both jobs to do: analysis is for them intricately bound up in narrative. Inadequate grounding in the larger context then makes objective historical explanation more difficult. It most certainly renders dismissal of intelligence reports by statesmen utterly incomprehensible. As a result some historians have been tempted to retreat for explanation into a *deus ex machina* or plain moral condemnation, which, for Western historians of Russia, is always the weapon of last resort. Here the most famous example of this kind, Stalin's blindness to the forthcoming invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, immediately springs to mind. But more of that later.

By the same token, the separation of the user from the analyst and the protection of the analyst from the consumer have proved no less important. The failure to abide by these rules of thumb frequently led to disaster.

Not least for these reasons, historians who had previously neglected intelligence as a factor worthy of attention could be expected to play down its importance. As with all innovations, therefore, a balance must be struck between clinging to the dull rigors of tried and tested methods and abandoning the apparent drudgery of old-fashioned research in diplomatic history for a single key that promises to unlock all the *arcana imperii*, or at least the most important. Sir Harry Hinsley, a sage official historian of British intelligence during World War II, did indeed worry lest the ingenuous drawn to the romance of the secret world would all too easily be seduced by the intelligence community, who could leak secrets selectively for their own undisclosed and possibly nefarious purposes; at the very least black propaganda. For the dependent historian privileged with scraps of secret intelligence from the top table, it is difficult to bite the hand that feeds the hungry.

Due to his wartime career as personal assistant to the head of the Government Code and Cypher School—the British code-breaking effort—Hinsley necessarily considered secret intelligence a factor critical to war and international relations. This opinion was, of course, subject to the important caveat that the value and justification of intelligence depend on the use that is made of its findings.³ Experienced diplomats, however, with no firsthand involvement in collection frequently found the product difficult to evaluate because of its uncertain provenance. If analysis without knowledge of provenance is problematic, then policy prescription without accurate analysis is folly.

Memory of that notorious forgery the Zinoviev Letter, carelessly acquired for cash from a Russian émigré by MI6 in 1924 and falsely attested to by the Foreign Office's much respected permanent undersecretary Sir Eyre Crowe, left an indelible imprint upon British diplomats who were privy to these events at close quarters.⁴

Robert Jervis alludes to another factor: "Foreign ministries, of course, carry out diplomacy, and so one might think that they would value intelligence more highly because of its closer links to this mission. But most diplomats have prided themselves on being generalists and have tended to believe, often correctly, that they can understand other countries better than can specialised intelligence officers."⁵ Jervis also rightly points out that diplomats are naturally ill-disposed toward intelligence officers, whose activities sometimes lead to complications in relations with the host government; at its worst a breach in relations and withdrawal of the embassy.

George Kennan needed no clandestine help to predict Stalin's behavior, which certainly mattered, because no secret intelligence of this kind was available. Under President Harry Truman, he played a major role in spawning covert operations, which he soon very much had cause to regret. Reacting later against what he saw as excessive attention to secret intelligence, Kennan insisted "that the involvement of our government in the acquisition of secret intelligence, by espionage and other unavowed processes, while perhaps occasionally unavoidable, has had ascribed to it a degree of importance far greater than it deserves."⁶

This sentiment was frequently echoed by Odom. Moreover, Gordon Barrass, a veteran of MI6 and formerly chief of the assessments staff at the British cabinet office, offers judicial counsel to the unwary doubtless borne of sobering experience. A firm advocate of "good intelligence," without which "policy is all too easily shaped by fear, ignorance or optimism," Barrass—by trade and therefore by inclination a strong proponent of human intelligence gathering—strongly implies that learning foreign languages and imbibing alien cultures—both traditionalist pursuits for the diplomatic historian—are vital to correct assessment of intelligence. And for good reason: "every society and bureaucracy has its own mantras, rhetoric, and conventions of political correctness."⁷

These limitations undermining the value of intelligence received in-depth analysis from Richard Betts shortly before intelligence history took off. In a pioneering article on "Analysis, War and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures

Are Inevitable," Betts took us a dimension beyond the soul-searching after the coup that overthrew Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973. Betts had been intimately involved on the staff of the Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities under the chairmanship of Senator Frank Church (D-Idaho), investigating the misdemeanors of various U.S. administrations—the so-called "crown jewels"—in 1975.

What Betts analyzes is "the inadequacy of intelligence," a feature he finds intractable. Why does intelligence fail? In his view: "In the best-known cases of intelligence failure, the most crucial mistakes have seldom been made by collectors of raw information, occasionally by professionals who produce finished analyses, but most often by the decision makers who consume the product of intelligence services." In short, "Policy premises constrict perception, and administrative workloads constrain reflection. Intelligence failure is political and psychological more often than organizational."⁸ This much is highlighted in the present book by Stephen Schuker in chapter 3 with respect to France in 1940 and by David Holloway in chapter 2 with respect to Russia in 1941.

Jervis, who drew Betts to Columbia University, opened his own academic career applying psychology to the study of international relations. He echoes Sun Tzu to the effect that "to understand each other's behavior, decision-makers usually have to understand how their own state is acting and how others see them. Although this would seem easy, in fact it is not. States have powerful and idealized, if not self-serving, self-images; they follow double standards and rarely appreciate the extent to which they menace others' interests."⁹ The inner world of East Germany's secret services outlined by Oliver Bange in chapter 6 certainly fits that pattern.

Trenchantly expressing the utmost skepticism, Jervis argues that "The basic outlines of threat assessment . . . are rarely in the province of intelligence, even though one could argue that this should be its most important function." They belong to the realm of policy, and policy is in the hands of others. Here the answers determine the selection of the evidence rather than vice versa. Thus "all too often . . . intelligence estimates tell us more about interests and foreign policy preferences of powerful groups than . . . about what the other side's intentions and capabilities are." Jervis thus safely concludes: "We should not expect too much of intelligence."¹⁰ In chapter 7, Holger Afflerbach provides ready illustration from the history of the Gehlen Organization, the predecessor of the BND (Bundesnachrichtendienst, or Federal Intelligence Service) in West Germany.

To say the least, the jury is evidently out as to how far secret intelligence is valuable or critical to the successful conduct of international relations, even among those formerly so intimately involved. From the operational point of view, what historians are doing is mirroring in the past the perennial dilemmas of the present. Thus what they have to say about the record should be of more than passing interest to present practitioners. It is not accidental that the first major work addressing the impact of secret intelligence on the history of international relations edited by May was funded by a rare figure unparalleled elsewhere: the enlightened patron of open-minded thinking heading assessments at the office of the Secretary of Defense, Andrew Marshall.

The essays below address both political and military intelligence, and strategic rather than field intelligence. Gathering intelligence comes through two means: human intelligence (humint) and signals/communication intelligence (sigint/comint). The preference for one—comint—over the other—humint—is often a matter of educational strength and tradition (preeminence in mathematics, for example, in Sweden, Poland, and Russia) as well as practicality (such as direct access to the best technology, which can be denied the adversary: the United States stands head and shoulders above others in this regard). Though, as Jonathan Haslam demonstrates in chapter 1, in Stalin's Russia, the vision of intelligence grew out of very recent revolutionary experience and operations against the counterrevolution, so humint always prevailed over sigint.

Whatever is gathered has, of course, to be interpreted. Cryptography is of no value without cryptanalysis. This process is critical to correct application. Otherwise what is collected will be wasted or, worse still, misinterpreted. Critical to assessment, Barrass reminds us, are the ethnic, cultural, and ideological prisms through which intelligence is interpreted. In this respect, intelligence assessment is a process no different from assessment of information coming in from diplomatic or, indeed, open sources. We have to imitate the anthropologist. We are not, as political scientists and economists would have it, naturally "rational" beings whose behavior can be predicted according to an abstract logic, but beings who have to be tutored to reason in an often unreasoning world.

We are looking at the role of intelligence in the history of international relations throughout the twentieth century in order to assess its impact over time. The problem of measuring impact is that our access to reliable sources is still highly restricted, and uneven between states and uneven over time. As

U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld reminded us: there are known unknowns and unknown unknowns. It is always hard to know what is being denied us and why (the unknown unknowns), though taking the long view with access to files more plentiful for the earliest period gives us a sense of what is missing (the known unknowns) than would have been obtained by focusing on a narrower and more recent period. Drawing lessons from a study such as this is no easy matter. We nonetheless believe that insights may be obtained for the current world by adopting a larger historical perspective.

The essays here presented offer an array of insights horizontally across countries and vertically through time. But all agree on the importance of not overestimating the contribution to be expected from secret intelligence. This is easier to see when it proves impossible to penetrate the enemy camp for direct access to the intentions of the opponent. In chapter 4, Georges-Henri Soutou emphasizes the problem postwar France faced in this respect and then illustrates the necessary improvisation that followed from it. Absent knowledge of what the adversary intended, the searchlight was focused on outward signs of enemy movement in the field of battle, which became something of an art form at allied intelligence in West Berlin.

The essays also concur on the damaging impact of high politics on the processes of gathering and analyzing the resulting product. But this was only one element, though crucial, produced by the larger material, as well as ideational context in which intelligence agencies had to operate. And here the dominant image of the massively invested U.S. intelligence services, or, indeed, that of the Russians in the Cold War, proves entirely misleading when observing even those of the great powers in Europe, where limited means required making choices between intelligence and defense capabilities as a whole, and between defense and diplomacy. As Richard Aldrich highlights for us in chapter 5, secret intelligence operates out of neither a social nor an economic vacuum. All too often, purist approaches to the subject modeled on postwar American behavior ignore that fundamental truth.

In an unusually well-documented contribution on Russia in chapter 2, Holloway argues the reasons for Stalin's unpreparedness in 1940–1941. This, it is fair to say, has long been an obsessive object of interest and study in Russia, because it made all the difference to the course of the war that followed from June 1941. Rather than rushing into moral judgments about the régime, Holloway instead takes a cool look at what information came in to Stalin and allows for the fact that not all the incoming intelligence data were consistent.

And in respect of revelations about U.S. construction of the atomic bomb, Holloway shows that Stalin once again consciously distanced himself from the findings of the intelligence services in reaching a final judgment. Whereas in the former case, it nearly led to disaster; in respect of the latter, Stalin was undoubtedly correct.

Bange, looking at the DDR, points out how intelligence gathering and analysis under dictatorship is hindered by mirror-imaging the adversary's intentions, and thereby misdirecting an expensive intelligence effort to futile ends, while consuming precious, limited material and human means. The East German regime, here as elsewhere, undermined its own security through a lack of self-questioning and subordination to doctrine.

For those dubious about the role that intelligence can play even in democracies, Schuker—a skeptic—has a great deal of interest to say in chapter 3. In his view, only when material military power stands in balance can intelligence make a difference; and in 1940, along with much else in Paris, French intelligence failed. France, of course, surrendered very early on; arguably due to deep-seated problems within French society that Hitler sensed instinctively. Was it therefore a surprise that French intelligence suffered as a consequence? Intelligence can never be better than the context that confines it and from which it operates.

This is the point of departure for Afflerbach in chapter 7, examining the close relationship between the postwar problem of recreating the German state after defeat in war but with the limited resources, in terms of personnel, inherited in large part from the previous and now utterly discredited regime.

Britain had no such disadvantages. But its relative success occurred against a background of tight secrecy. Thus our contributor here has artfully had to find something of a back door into intelligence by asking about money: "cuts and economies can illuminate what intelligence was provided and at what cost," Aldrich persuasively argues in chapter 5. This approach allows him to survey the Anglo-American relationship from the vantage point of Britain's diminishing resources in the face of the need to come up with a steady flow of results to sustain a crucial strategic alliance.

Scant resources were, of course, the major problem for postwar France, as Soutou relates in chapter 4; particularly acute given, not only the magnitude of objectives originally laid down by General de Gaulle, but the poverty of the budget available even after he resumed power. The response was quite naturally to focus on the material and the measurable in terms of enemy

capabilities rather than the ephemera that emerged when aiming at higher targets relating to intention.

These various chapters all highlight the critical importance of the prevailing circumstances in which intelligence operates. It appears that the context of relevance for effectiveness is primarily but not entirely domestic. It includes the impact of technology on encryption and decryption; the form of government and nature of decision-making; ideological and cultural pressures on the collation and analysis of information; limitations imposed by financial stringency; and the deadweight of tradition (fighting the last war). Such elements may exert an unseen influence on daily practice, but their cumulative effect overall may prove critical in undermining efficiency. An understanding of them requires interdisciplinary expertise. The foreign context is arguably much more simple and no different from that in warfare: namely, the strength of the intelligence service relative to the adversary's. If anything, this underlines a core truth that Machiavelli so well understood: the more formidable the adversary, the greater the importance of putting one's own house in order.

Notes

1. K. Jeffrey, *MI6: The History of the Secret Intelligence Service, 1909–1949* (London, 2011); C. Andrew, *The Defence of the Realm: The Authorized History of MI5* (London, 2010).
2. MS in the authors' possession.
3. See F. H. Hinsley's lecture on "The Influence of Ultra in the Second World War," *Intelligencer* 14, no. 2 (Winter–Spring 2004): 463–465; reprinted but without the exchanges with the audience, in F. Hinsley and A. Stripp, *Codebreakers: The Inside History of Bletchley Park* (Oxford, 1993), 1–13.
4. The late former diplomat and historian E. H. Carr was one such.
5. R. Jervis, "Intelligence and Foreign Policy: A Review Essay," *International Security* 11, no. 3 (Winter 1986–1987): 141–161.
6. G. Kennan, *Around the Cragged Hill: A Personal and Political Philosophy* (New York, 1993), 209.
7. G. Barrass, *The Great Cold War: A Journey Through the Hall of Mirrors* (Stanford, CA, 2009), 407.
8. Betts, "Analysis, War and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures Are Inevitable," *World Politics* 31, 1 (October 1978): 61–89.
9. Jervis, "Intelligence and Foreign Policy"; and see also Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (Ithaca, NY, 2010).
10. Jervis, "Intelligence and Foreign Policy."