



Guide to the Study of Intelligence

Intelligence in World War I

1914-1918

by Mark Stout, Ph.D.

All the major powers entered World War I ill-prepared for what was to come. This was true with regard to the societies, the fighting forces themselves, and the certainly the intelligence services. The war was a struggle not just of armies and navies but of entire empires and economies. Not surprisingly then, it saw a vast expansion of intelligence organizations, an influx of new intelligence collection technologies, a flood of data, and the penetration of intelligence services into the lives of everyday people.

When the war started in the late summer of 1914, the few military intelligence personnel who existed still thought about intelligence and reconnaissance in ways more reminiscent of the Franco-Prussian War or the American wars on the Great Plains than of modern realities. The decision by the editors of the U.S. Army's *Infantry Journal* to publish a two-part translation of a French military work entitled *The Service of Information: A Practical Study* starting in the July-August 1914 issue illustrates this point. The article noted that "the spy reveals himself by...his great politeness... his calculated self-effacement, his habit of looking at or hearing things without appearing to do so" and mentioned cavalry but not the airplane and signaling with fires and smoke but not by radio or telephone.¹ Meanwhile, national intelligence services, such as Britain's MI-5 and MI-6 (as they later became known) were tiny outfits, where they existed at all.

The United Kingdom and France, among other World War I belligerents, underwent spy scares in the years before the war. For instance, in France it was

widely believed that roadside advertising signs for the popular Kub brand bouillon cubes contained coded information from German spies that would be used by invading armies. Such fears only proliferated after the start of the war. Once the United States entered the war in 1917, it aimed domestic surveillance at anyone who had ties real or imagined to Germany or other Central Powers or who had gripes with the United States Government. Hence, there was widespread surveillance of the Lutheran Church, the International Workers of the World, African-Americans, and others. The 1917 case of an American naval officer who was investigated because his housekeeper "looked German," was not atypical.²

Though most spy mania was ill founded, there was legitimate reason for governments to be concerned, as well. What we now call covert action or influence operations played a bigger role in World War I than in any previous war. For example, the United States and the other Entente allies tried to play on ethnic divisions within the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Germany mounted an extensive sabotage campaign in the United States from 1914 to 1917 to stem the flow of munitions and supplies from this country to the Allies.³ Germany and the Ottoman Empire, home to the Caliph, also tried to inspire Muslims to launch a military jihad against their imperial overlords in London, Paris and St. Petersburg.

World War I saw significant changes in espionage. While many espionage operations—notably the Allied train-watching networks in Belgium and Germany—continued to rely on physical observation, espionage also entailed more and more the theft of secrets from inside foreign bureaucracies.

Even greater evolution took place in technical intelligence collection. World War I saw the creation of sizeable staffs both in the field and in national capitals to make and break code and cipher systems. The competition between makers and breakers of systems became so intense that mathematically one could calculate how much time would pass from the first use of a new codebook until the enemy would

2. Jeffery M. Dorwart, *The Office of Naval Intelligence: The Birth of America's First Intelligence Agency, 1865-1918*, (Annapolis, Naval Institute Press, 1979), p. 119.

3. In World War I, the Central Powers consisted of the German Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Ottoman Empire, and Bulgaria. The Entente Powers, or Allies, encompassed the French Republic, the British Empire, the Russian Empire, and Japan, Belgium, Serbia, Greece, Montenegro, Romania, Italy and the United States, though the last preferred to refer to itself as an "Associated" rather than an Allied power.

1. J. Raoult de Rudeval, (French), "The Service of Information: A Practical Study," *Infantry Journal*, 11:1, (July-August, 1914), pp. 88-114; and 11:2 (September-October, 1914), pp. 264-288.

be able to read messages sent using it. Traffic analysis—the derivation of intelligence information from the patterns of message distribution rather than the contents of the messages—also dates to World War I.

There was similar growth in aerial reconnaissance. In many ways, the day-to-day workhorse of aerial reconnaissance was the tethered balloon but the newfangled airplane was the up and coming technology. By the end of the war, observation planes were equipped with cameras and radios. Fighter planes existed largely to attack balloons and observation planes. Frank Luke, the second ranked American fighter ace of the war specialized in shooting down German observation balloons. In effect, he was a counterintelligence officer. The flourishing of aerial reconnaissance led to the development of photo interpretation, which, in turn, led to the flourishing art of camouflage.

The vast amounts of data available to commanders and decision makers were useful at all levels from the front line trenches to national considerations of grand strategy. Extensive intelligence collection and analysis was a critical component of the British naval blockade against Germany. It also enabled the first glimmerings of what became strategic bombing. After the war when the American delegation went to the Paris Peace Talks in 1919 it made sure to arrange for intelligence support.

WORLD WAR I SAW THE BIRTH OF MODERN INTELLIGENCE

The intelligence services of all the powers that survived the war were sharply scaled back as part of the post-war demobilizations⁴, but the intelligence business was irrevocably changed. Intelligence personnel of 1918 would have readily understood the work of their counterparts in World War II or even the Cold War. The examples of World War I intelligence officers Allen Dulles and cryptanalysts Dillwyn (Dilly) Knox and William Friedman illustrate the point. Dulles ultimately rose to become the Director of Central Intelligence for Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy. Knox was one of the most important members of Bletchley Park, Britain's codebreaking organization, until his death in 1943 and Friedman made comparably important contributions to American SIGINT

4. The exception might be the newly established Bolshevik Soviet Union, which in 1917 rapidly grew a new secret service, the Checka, under Felix Dzerzhinsky.

during World War II and eventually retired from the National Security Agency in 1955. In short, World War I saw the birth of modern intelligence.

READINGS FOR INSTRUCTORS

World War I may have been “The Great War,” but the amount of scholarly literature devoted to intelligence in that war is not great. In fact, it is dwarfed by the literature of intelligence in World War II. The scholarly neglect of WW I intelligence is illustrated by the fact that a single bibliographic essay published in 2012 was able to capture almost everything worthwhile on the subject in English and French while even including a few items in German and Italian. (Daniel Larsen, “Intelligence in the First World War: The State of the Field,” *Intelligence and National Security*, (2012, DOI: 10.1080/02684527.2012.727070.) For the sake of concision, this article focuses on book-length treatments, but Larsen's review will be of interest to those seeking to dive deeper or into more obscure corners of the topic.

Strategic Assessment

Ernest May's edited volume *Knowing One's Enemies: Intelligence Assessment Before the Two World Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984) is a classic of intelligence literature. There is no comparable work.

British Intelligence

Christopher Andrew's *Her Majesty's Secret Service: The Making of the British Intelligence Community* (New York: Penguin, 1987) contains the best broad view of the state of British intelligence on the eve of the Great War and how it developed during the war from London to the front lines.

Andrew's *Defend the Realm: The Authorized History of MI5* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010) contains an indispensable treatment of British domestic intelligence during the War. Richard Popplewell's *Intelligence and Imperial Defence: British Intelligence and the Defence of the Indian Empire, 1904-1924* (London: Frank Cass, 1995) looks at British counterintelligence operations in the Empire.

Keith Jeffery's *The Secret History of MI6* (New York: Penguin, 2010), also an authorized history, contains the best overall account of British espionage operations abroad during the War. World War I spy memoirs are not notable for their rigid devotion to truth. Two

that are worthwhile, however, are *All's Fair: The Story of the British Secret Service behind the German Lines* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1934) by the South African Henry Landau who conducted important operations out of The Netherlands, including overseeing the famous Dame Blanche spy network and Compton Mackenzie's *Greek Memories* (London: Cassell, 1932), which netted him a prosecution for violating the British Official Secrets Act. Robin Bruce Lockhart's *Reilly: Ace of Spies* should be avoided at all cost. For a reliable account of British intelligence operations in Russia, see instead Michael Occleshaw's *Dances in Deep Shadow: Britain's Clandestine War in Russia, 1917-1920* (London: Constable, 2006).

The performance of the intelligence arm of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) has long been the subject of criticism, perhaps as a corollary of the now-discredited "lions led by donkeys" myth. Jim Beach's *Haig's Intelligence: GHQ and the German Army, 1916-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) goes a long way toward rehabilitating BEF intelligence and its leader General John Charteris. Two excellent works cover British military intelligence in the Middle East: Polly Mohs' *Military Intelligence and the Arab Revolt: The First Modern Intelligence War* (New York: Routledge, 2007) and Yigal Sheffy's *British Intelligence in the Palestine Campaign 1914-1918* (London: Frank Cass, 1998).

Patrick Beesly's *Room 40: British Naval Intelligence 1914-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984) is the best work overall work on the subject. Thomas Boghardt's recent *The Zimmermann Telegram: Intelligence, Diplomacy, and America's Entry into World War I* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2012) gives a first rate account of the interception and decryption by Room 40 of the infamous telegram and how Britain used it as part of its campaign to bring the United States into the war. Boghardt finds that the telegram played less of a role in America's actual march toward war than has previously been thought.

American Intelligence

Christopher Andrew's *For the President's Eyes Only: Secret Intelligence and the American Presidency from Washington to Bush* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995) has an excellent chapter on Woodrow Wilson and intelligence. *The Archaeologist Was a Spy: Sylvanus G. Morley and the Office of Naval Intelligence* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003) by Charles H. Harris III and Louis R. Sadler contains an good overview of the American intelligence services during World War I. It

also provides a fascinating case study of how the Office of Naval Intelligence conducted human intelligence in Latin America, a major field of interest for the Navy and War Departments at the time.

Jeffrey Dorwart's *Office of Naval Intelligence: The Birth of America's First Intelligence Agency, 1882-1918* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1979) does a lot well in a relatively few pages. James L. Gilbert's *World War I and the Origins of U.S. Military Intelligence* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2012) is a workmanlike treatment of its subject, covering both War Department intelligence in the United States and the intelligence components of the American Expeditionary Forces in France. Bruce Bidwell's *History of the Military Intelligence Division, Department of the Army General Staff: 1775-1941* (Frederick: University Publications of America, 1986) is a thorough but dry official history covering both foreign and domestic operations.

Herbert O. Yardley's *American Black Chamber* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2004) is a spirited account of code making and breaking in the War Department and State Department from 1917 to the late 1920s. A scandalous bestseller in its day, it should be treated with caution because it takes more than a few liberties with the truth, usually in order to inflate Yardley's role and genius. Nevertheless, it is a classic of intelligence literature, not least because it inspired literally generations of Americans to join the intelligence services or to study the intelligence services. It should be read in conjunction with David Kahn's *The Reader of Gentlemen's Mail: Herbert O. Yardley and the Birth of American Codebreaking* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

Roy Talbert's *Negative Intelligence: The Army and the American Left, 1917-1941* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991) and Joan M. Jensen's *Army Surveillance in America, 1775-1980* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991) are excellent treatments of American domestic intelligence. Jensen also wrote what is still the best work on the quasi-official American Protective League (APL), a 250,000 man volunteer counterintelligence force: *The Price of Vigilance* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1969). The APL's quasi-official history *The Web* (Chicago: Reilly & Lee Co., 1919) written by Emerson Hough is a fascinating and occasionally frightening artifact of the time. Mark Ellis' *Race, War and Surveillance: African Americans and the United States Government during World War I* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001) is a good introduction to surveillance of African-Americans during the War.

German Intelligence

There is a great lack of literature available on German intelligence during World War I. The most famous German spy of that war was, of course, Mata Hari. However, time spent studying her is time wasted, unless the purpose is to consider how someone so inconsequential became so prominent. Thomas Boghardt's *Spies of the Kaiser: German Covert Operations in Great Britain during the First World War Era* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) is a fine guide to German intelligence operations in Britain. German covert operations in the United States are covered in Reinhard Doerries' *Imperial Challenge: Ambassador Count Bernstorff and German-American Relations, 1908-1917* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989). Sean McMeekin's *The Berlin-Baghdad Express: The Ottoman Empire and Germany's Bid for World Power* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2010) has a good account of the effort to turn Muslims against the Allies. The memoirs of the head of German military intelligence, Major Walter Nicolai, are available in English as *The German Secret Service* (London: S. Paul, 1924).

Other Countries

As little as there is on German intelligence, there is even less on the other belligerents. Douglas Porch's *The French Secret Services: From the Dreyfus Affair to the Gulf War* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995) is useful for France. The military intelligence efforts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire are generally agreed to have been first-rate. Sadly, there is nothing book-length (and precious little of any length) in English on the subject. The situation is comparable for Russian, Italian, and Turkish intelligence.

Technical Intelligence Collection

David Kahn's monumental *The Codebreakers: The Story of Secret Writing* (New York: Scribner, 1996) contains an excellent discussion of the cryptologic efforts of all major belligerents in World War I. Terrance Finnegan's *Shooting the Front: Allied Aerial Reconnaissance in the First World War* (Stroud: Spellmount, 2011) is beautifully illustrated and will leave the reader with a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

Women in Intelligence

In *Female Intelligence: Women and Espionage in the First World War* (New York: New York University, 2003), Tammy Proctor estimates that some 6,000 women

served British intelligence in some capacity during World War I in capacity. She effectively debunks the seductress stereotype of the female spy.

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