



GUIDE TO STUDY OF INTELLIGENCE

British Intelligence¹

by Dr. Huw Dylan and Dr. Michael S. Goodman

For centuries, British kings and queens have utilised their spies and spymasters to safeguard their grip on power. Today's intelligence officers can trace their professional lineage to the Sixteenth Century. They can look to a long tradition of foreign spying during the age of empire, and the exploits of the officers who, for the defence of India, surveyed and spied in the badlands of Afghanistan – the adventures that inspired possibly the greatest spy story, Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*.² And they can examine how British intelligence performed, often with distinction, in the great wars of the Twentieth Century. They have an historic legacy. Today, in the United Kingdom, intelligence remains a vital component of statecraft. This article introduces British intelligence and offers an insight into 'the British way' in intelligence.

The rich history has been obscured by official secrecy until fairly recently. In 1985, the great historian of war, Professor Sir Michael Howard, lamented that 'so far as official government policy is concerned, the British security and intelligence services do not exist. Enemy agents are found under gooseberry bushes and intelligence is brought in by the storks.'³ This is no longer the case. Over the final decades of the Twentieth Century a small revolution occurred in official attitudes towards secrecy. Wartime intelligence veterans published their memoirs; official histories were published; and the 1993 Waldegrave Open Government initiative increased the volume of

intelligence papers in the British National Archives, leading to a boom in popular and academic writing. This trend towards limited (although unprecedented) openness has continued, most notably through the publication of official histories of the Security Service (MI5), the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS/MI6), and the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC).⁴ It has also been supplemented by authoritative inquiries into the intelligence community, most notably the Butler Report into pre-war intelligence on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction.⁵ Combined, these sources provide students and scholars with outstanding insight into the role of intelligence in British statecraft.

Establishing the British Way in Intelligence

As early as the Sixteenth Century, Sir Francis Walsingham and his predecessor, Sir William Cecil, ran a network of 'intelligencers', gathering intelligence on Catholic plots against Queen Elizabeth.⁶ Throughout the Seventeenth Century Britain gathered intelligence on restive plotters by intercepting their post, and by the Eighteenth Century there was an official decipherer targeting the codes of foreign powers.⁷ These activities were funded by a national secret service fund, administered by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. However, before the Twentieth Century intelligence gathering was not professionalised in the same manner as diplomacy; it was viewed as a distinctly ungentlemanly activity. It was the armed forces who developed and formalised intelligence, operating, as they were, on the sharp end of imperial expansion. Britain boasted a naval intelligence department in 1887 and the War Office established its intelligence branch in 1873.⁸ These organisations pioneered modern intelligence in Britain, gathering, processing, and disseminating intelligence, based on all sources. But it took many more years to develop a true British intelligence community.

4. C. Andrew, *Defence of the Realm: The Authorised History of MI5*. (London: Allen Lane, 2009); K. Jeffery, *MI6: The History of the Secret Intelligence Service, 1909-1949*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2010); M. S. Goodman, *The Official History of the Joint Intelligence Committee: From the Approach of the Second World War to the Suez Crisis*. (London: Routledge, 2014).

5. Butler, the Lord of Brockwell. HC898. *Review of Intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction* (London: TSO, 2004).

6. See S. Alford, *The Early Elizabethan Polity: William Cecil and the British Succession Crisis, 1558-1569*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

7. Stephen Twigge, Edward Hampshire, Graham Macklin, *British intelligence: Secrets, Spies and Sources*, (London: The National Archives, 2008), pp.10 – 11.

8. *Ibid*, p.11.

1. Editor's Note: AFIO has retained the original UK spellings and punctuations of these two British scholars.

2. See P. Hopkirk, *The Great Game: On Secret Service in High Asia*. (London: John Murray, 2006); M. Grant (ed). *The British Way in Cold Warfare: Intelligence, Diplomacy and the Bomb, 1945-75*. (London: Continuum, 2011).

3. C. Andrew, 'Intelligence, International Relations and Under-theorisation', *Intelligence and National Security* 19 (2) (2004), 71.

The catalyst for the creation of the modern intelligence machinery was the rise of Germany. British military organisations and the Foreign Office proved unable to deliver the intelligence demanded by anxious ministers, so in 1909 the Committee of Imperial Defence created the Secret Service Bureau (SSB). Originally consisting of an army and a navy branch, it was soon reorganised into a foreign and a domestic section. The domestic or 'home' section would eventually become the Security Service and was headed by the Army Officer, Captain Vernon Kell. The foreign section, MI-1c would eventually become SIS; it was headed by the redoubtable Commander Mansfield Cumming, who signed his letters in green ink with a single letter, 'C' – a tradition followed by all chiefs of SIS to this day.⁹

Establishing the SSB began the long process that yielded a functional intelligence community. As befitted its imperial heritage, until the Second World War the military largely dominated intelligence. MI5 and SIS were civilian agencies, but heavily staffed by former military men, and their concern was largely (although by no means entirely) with enemy capabilities. After 1923, communications intelligence was the purview of the SIS controlled Government Code and Cypher School (GC&CS), which after World War 1 amalgamated the Admiralty and the Army's wartime SIGINT outfits, Room 40 and MI-1b.¹⁰ The Army and Navy maintained their own intelligence branches.¹¹ But the level of coordination was questionable. The Foreign Office remained rather aloof from the agencies, considering itself the sole authority on foreign and diplomatic developments. Duplication was rife, with one commentator after the war noting how he witnessed "junior officers in the intelligence divisions of the Air Ministry, War Office, and the Admiralty all doing the same job, writing the same things, gathering the same information, most of it not secret in any way."¹²

In 1936, with war clouds once again on the horizon, the Secretary to the Cabinet and the Committee of Imperial Defence, Sir Maurice Hankey proposed reforms to ensure that the medley of organisations generated useful intelligence to meet the needs of the

Chiefs of Staff and the government. They created the Joint Intelligence Committee, which established itself at the apex of Britain's intelligence machinery, and remained there.¹³ This development was significant for the way Britain managed its intelligence affairs. After some teething troubles, the JIC secured the active engagement of the Foreign Office, and its members included relevant policy departments, the armed forces and the intelligence agencies, all of which would contribute and agree to the Committee's proceedings. This ensured that direction and collection were more focused; that JIC reports were truly 'national', consensus reports, rather than departmental ones; that intelligence and policy were coordinated; and that no single department could dominate. Today these characteristics remain: the British way in intelligence is characterised by the committee approach to management, an intelligence community working jointly rather than competitively, a (general) drive for consensus, and the view that intelligence is valuable to all facets of national business.

British Intelligence Today

The core institutions of British intelligence have proven resilient. They have survived withering criticism following spectacular failures and have weathered economic boom and bust. This is due to several factors: the legacy of intelligence support for policy making during the Second World War; the Cold War and the Soviet nuclear threat; the centrality of intelligence to the Anglo-American relationship – valued and nurtured by British politicians from Churchill to Tony Blair; the importance of good intelligence in the small wars of the end of empire; and because of the consistent threat the UK has faced from terrorists. Britain has fought very hard to maintain its intelligence power, even as other aspects of its global influence diminished.

Two notable features differentiate the contemporary machinery from its Cold War incarnation. Firstly, today, the services have reasonably prominent public profiles. They recruit openly, (some of) their records are available, they have published official histories, and the leaders have appeared in public before the parliamentary Intelligence and Security Community (ISC). The second feature is the ISC itself, and oversight of the British intelligence community. Although the JIC and Ministers exercised internal oversight

9. Alan Judd, *The Quest for 'C': Mansfield Cumming and the Founding of the Secret Service* (Harper Collins: London, 1999), p.100; Andrew, *The Defence of the Realm*; Keith Jeffery, MI6.

10. Twigge, Hampshire, Macklin, *British intelligence*, p.297.

11. Goodman, M.S. 'Learning to Walk: The Origins of the UK's Joint Intelligence Committee', *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*. (21)(1) (2008), pp.40-56.

12. Patrick Howarth, *Intelligence Chief Extraordinary* (London: Bodley Head, 1986), p.199.

13. Goodman, M.S. *The Official History of the Joint Intelligence Committee*.

throughout the Twentieth Century, the services were not subject to robust parliamentary oversight. This changed in 1994 with the Intelligence Services Act and the establishment of the ISC. Recently reformed with the 2013 Justice and Security Act, the ISC is now a Committee of Parliament, reporting directly to that institution on the policy, administration, expenditure, and aspects of operational activity of the agencies.¹⁴

Setting Intelligence Requirements in Britain

The British intelligence community is comparatively small, therefore setting defined requirements has been vital. For the Cold War and the early years of the Twenty-First Century this was the responsibility of the JIC. In 2010 this changed when the coalition government established a National Security Council (NSC).¹⁵ Chaired by the Prime Minister the NSC works to “coordinate and deliver the Government’s international security agenda”, and decide upon the strategic direction of British foreign, defence and security policy.¹⁶ Soon after its establishment the NSC published Britain’s first national security strategy, which identified 15 “priority risk types”.¹⁷ These national priorities guide the more detailed priorities the JIC sets for the intelligence machinery annually.¹⁸ The system is based on similar principles to those upon which the JIC was established: firstly, of utilising the committee approach to achieve coordination, consensus, and efficiency. Secondly, ensuring that intelligence departments and policy departments are closely linked.

Collection

For the past century Britain’s intelligence

14. See the ISC’s informative website: <http://isc.independent.gov.uk/> (accessed 12 June 2014).

15. Some have argued that this led to a downgrading of the JIC, see P. H. J. Davies, ‘Twilight of Britain’s Joint Intelligence Committee’, *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*. (24)(3) (2011), pp.427-446.

16. See the UK Government’s statement at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/establishment-of-a-national-security-council> (accessed 11 June 2014). See the list of priorities in the National Security Strategy at the UK government’s website: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-national-security-strategy-a-strong-britain-in-an-age-of-uncertainty> (accessed 11 June 2014).

17. *ibid.*

18. The Security Service remains somewhat anomalous in that it retains more capacity than the other agencies to set its own requirements within the broad guidance set by the Security Service act of 1989. See the Security Service’s website: <https://www.mi5.gov.uk/home/the-threats/espionage/how-does-mi5-tackle-espionage.html> (accessed 11 June 2014).

agencies have existed in a paradoxical state: their existence was officially denied, and yet their exploits and presence in popular culture ensured their fame. It is rumoured that London bus conductors would announce that it was time for spies to alight when commuter buses stopped near the Security Service’s nominally secret headquarters. And despite not being officially acknowledged until 1992, and not being put on a statutory basis until the 1994 Intelligence Services Act, MI6 had been a global brand for decades.¹⁹ Today Britain openly acknowledges its three main intelligence agencies. MI5 and SIS work closely with their extremely secretive sister agency Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ). All are funded centrally through the Single Intelligence Account, overseen by the ISC.²⁰

Based in Vauxhall Cross on the south bank of the river Thames in London, SIS is Britain’s foreign intelligence agency. Although its contemporary activities are secret, its role is clear: it collects “secret intelligence and mounts covert operations overseas in support of British Government objectives”. This includes a wide range of activities relating to national, international, and economic security, and serious crime. SIS “uses human and technical sources” and maintains “liaison with a wide range of foreign intelligence and security services.”²¹ The Foreign Secretary remains the government minister responsible for it and its activities. Guided broadly by JIC requirements, SIS can also be tasked by its customer departments, for example the Foreign Office.

SIS’s domestic counterpart is the Security Service, known as MI5. Based in Thames House on the north bank of the Thames, belatedly it was given a statutory basis by the 1989 Security Service Act and is responsible for “protecting the UK against threats to national security from espionage, terrorism and sabotage, from the activities of agents of foreign powers, and from actions intended to overthrow or undermine parliamentary democracy by political, industrial or violent means.”²² The Service’s main areas of work are cur-

19. Prior to being established on a statutory basis in 1994 the Foreign Secretary could, theoretically, have unilaterally disbanded the agency.

20. They are sometimes known as the SIA agencies and represent the core of British intelligence collection. They are not the sole collection agencies, the Ministry of Defence retains a capacity in DI, Defence Intelligence, which works with the core national agencies. DI is funded separately through the Defence Vote.

21. See SIS’s website <https://www.sis.gov.uk/about-us/what-we-do.html> (accessed 11 June 2014).

22. See the Security Service’s website: <https://www.mi5.gov.uk/home/about-us/who-we-are.html> (accessed 11 June 2014).

rently international and domestic counter-terrorism, counter-espionage, protective security, and counter-proliferation.²³ To fulfil its functions it collects intelligence through human sources, surveillance, cooperation with foreign and domestic partners, interception of communications, and intrusive surveillance (bugging). The Security Service is answerable to the Home Secretary, who authorises intrusive operations under the authority granted by the 2000 Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act (RIPA). It has no powers of arrest, being primarily an investigative and analytical organisation, a factor that mandates close cooperation with the police.

Both agencies are dwarfed in terms of personnel and budget by GCHQ, Britain's SIGINT agency. Based in Cheltenham, in a building commonly known as "the doughnut", it is an extremely secretive agency; in contrast with SIS and MI5, GCHQ has not published an authorised, official history. It is, however, an agency built on a rich tradition of code breaking. Today, GCHQ is the responsibility of the Foreign Secretary, and notes that it "plays a part in the fight against terrorism, drug trafficking, and other forms of serious crime, as well as supporting military operations across the world."²⁴ Broadly, its work is based on intercepting and breaking the communications of targets. But the agency's remit is expansive. It remains responsible for "information assurance", securing British communications from eavesdropping enemies. This role is managed by the Communications Electronics Security Group.²⁵ A major and growing component of its work is related to the cyber realm, a first order British security priority in the 2010 National Security Strategy.²⁶ This is primarily a defensive function, and there are myriad organisations that aid it in identifying, understanding and countering the threat. They are managed by the Office of Cyber Security and Information Assurance, which is based in the Cabinet Office.²⁷ But GCHQ also houses an offensive element. Defence Secretary Philip Hammond noted in 2013 that Britain was 'developing a full spectrum military cyber capability, including a

strike capability.'²⁸

Analysis

The JIC has gained a degree of notoriety as "the anvil" of British intelligence assessment. However, the JIC members are extremely senior (and therefore busy) officials and politicians, and they are supported by a comparatively small Assessments Staff (the drafters); although they may be responsible for the most exalted intelligence assessment products, they are by no means alone in performing the task. Indeed, the processing of intelligence in Britain involves more than a common-sense understanding of the word "analysis" suggests.

As Lord Butler noted in his 2004 report, the processing of intelligence can refer to validation, analysis, and assessment.²⁹ Validation is a process that usually occurs within the relevant agency. It is a process of ensuring that the means by which the information was gathered is sound. This process is generally conducted within the collecting agency.³⁰

Analysis follows validation. This is the process of examining the information, generally by subject matter experts. The expert "assembles individual intelligence reports into meaningful strands, whether weapons programmes, military operations or diplomatic policies. Intelligence reports take on meaning as they are put into context."³¹ According to Butler, the main cohort of analysts in Britain are to be found in Defence Intelligence (DI). DI's parent department, the Ministry of Defence, is the largest recipient of intelligence. But the Security Service, GCHQ and law enforcement organisations, like the National Crime Agency, all house a number of analysts.³²

Finally, assessment is the process of fitting the often diffuse intelligence into a broader pattern or trend. In Britain this process is usually – but not always, or necessarily – all source. It can be conducted departmentally, in DI for military trends, for example, or interdepartmentally, for example, at the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC) for short and medium-term assessments of the terror threat.³³ But the

23. As of 2014.

24. See GCHQ's website: http://www.gchq.gov.uk/what_we_do/Pages/index.aspx (accessed 11 June 2014).

25. <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/cesg> (accessed 11 June 2014).

26. http://www.gchq.gov.uk/what_we_do/the-threats-we-face/Pages/The-cyber-threat.aspx (accessed 11 June 2014).

27. See <https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/office-of-cyber-security-and-information-assurance> (accessed 11 June 2014), and the Parliamentary Note on 'Cyber Security in the UK', 2001, available at http://www.parliament.uk/documents/post/postpn389_cyber-security-in-the-UK.pdf

28. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/reserves-head-up-new-cyber-unit> (accessed 11 June 2014).

29. Butler, The Lord of Brockwell. HC898. *Review of Intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction*. (London: TSO, 2004).

30. Butler, *Review of Intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction*. p.9.

31. Butler, *Review of Intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction*. p.10.

32. A browse through the jobs advertised on their websites offers a glimpse into the kind of analytical work they conduct.

33. JTAC was created in 2003 and analyses and assesses all

main thrust of national analysis is performed by the Assessments Staff in the Cabinet Office, which consists of roughly 30 officials. They are assigned topics and assess incoming intelligence in consultation with relevant departments. The papers they produce are “subject to formal inter-departmental scrutiny and challenge” in subject or area specific Current Intelligence Groups (CIG), which bring together experts from across government.³⁴ Once agreed, the paper is forwarded to the JIC for discussion, approval, and dissemination to relevant customers.

Dissemination

Given the number of channels that exist between the policy departments, the armed forces, and the intelligence agencies, generalising about the process of dissemination is problematic. Intelligence can be passed directly to departments in raw form, from SIS to the Foreign Office for example. If it is actionable and time-sensitive it may be passed to enforcement agencies or to the military. Processed intelligence like JTAC reports are disseminated widely to a range of relevant customers, as are DI reports on issues like weapons of mass destruction. At the highest level of government, the JIC remains the mechanism of dissemination, reflecting the “national” character of its reporting. Since 2013 it has produced three specific types of reports: JIC assessments, broader papers approved by the Committee; shorter Joint Intelligence Organisation (JIO) Intelligence Briefs, short notice assessments in response to received intelligence, approved by the JIC chair or a delegated authority; and JIO Intelligence Summaries, assessments produced periodically in response to streams of intelligence or other information.³⁵ The process is designed to ensure that at-the-top-of-government assessments are the product of consensus and a robust all-source process, agreed upon by a wide range of government departments.

This final point underlines what might be described as “the British way” in intelligence. In contrast to the larger American intelligence community, there is a drive to provide customers at the highest level with a single, all-source and community agreed

national product. Working to a consensus is key. This reflects the British Cabinet system of government; the British intelligence community is indeed a product of its environment. In the future the machinery will continue to adapt. The central assessment machinery has undergone several reforms since the Butler Review; individual agencies will adapt to meet developing threats. Like all intelligence communities, the British must struggle with the question of how to deal with the volume of information available from open sources, and the question of how to identify the needles of threat information in the haystacks of communications data. This will continue to provoke controversy, as the Snowden revelations have recently shown. But two things can be said for sure: intelligence will continue to be a vital component of British statecraft, its legacy will serve it well in this regard. And secondly, the services are unlikely to be able to retreat from the public eye. ✓

READINGS FOR INSTRUCTORS

Overview

- Richard J. Aldrich, Rory Cormac, Michael S. Goodman (eds) *Spying on the World: The Declassified Documents of the Joint Intelligence Committee, 1936-2013* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014)
- Len Scott, ‘British Intelligence and the Cold War’ in Loch K. Johnson (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of National Security Intelligence* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2010)
- National Intelligence Machinery* (London: HMSO, 2010) available online at https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/61808/nim-november2010.pdf
- Stephen Twigge, Edward Hampshire, Graham Macklin, *British intelligence: Secrets, Spies and Sources*, (London: The National Archives, 2008)

Security Intelligence

- Christopher Andrew, *The Defence of the Realm: The Authorized History of MI5* (London: Allen Lane, 2009)
- Steve Hewitt, *The British War on Terror: Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism on the Home Front Since 9/11* (London: Continium, 2010)
- Stella Rimington, *Open Secret: The Autobiography of the Former Director-General of MI5* (London: Arrow, 2002)

Foreign Intelligence

- Gordon Corera, *MI6: Life and Death in the British Secret Service* (London: Phoenix, 2012)
- Jeffery, K. *MI6: the History of the Secret Intelligence Service, 1909-1949*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2010)
- Richard J. Aldrich, *The Hidden Hand: Britain, America and Cold*

intelligence relating to international terrorism, at home and overseas. See <https://www.mi5.gov.uk/home/about-us/who-we-are/organisation/joint-terrorism-analysis-centre.html> (accessed 11 June 2014).

34. *National Intelligence Machinery* (London: HMSO, 2011). p.24

35. Intelligence and Security Committee: Annual Report. p.33. Available at <http://isc.independent.gov.uk/committee-reports/annual-reports>

War Secret Intelligence (London: John Murray, 2009)

Signals Intelligence

Richard J. Aldrich, GCHQ: *The Uncensored Story of Britain's Most Secret Agency*. (London: HarperPress, 2010).

John Ferris, 'The Road to Bletchley Park: The British Experience with Signals Intelligence 1892–1945.' *Intelligence and National Security*, 17:1 (2002).

John Ferris, "Before 'Room 40': The British Empire and Signals Intelligence, 1898-1914." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 12: 4 (1989)

Military Intelligence

Philip. H. J. Davies, 'Defence Intelligence in the UK after the Mountbatten Reforms: Organisational and inter-organisational Dilemmas of Joint Military Intelligence.' *Public Policy and Administration* 28:2 (2012)

Huw Dylan, 'The Joint Intelligence Bureau: (Not so) Secret Intelligence for the Post War World.' *Intelligence and National Security* 27:1 (2012).

Mark Urban, *Task Force Black: The Explosive True Story of the SAS and the Secret War in Iraq* (London: Little, Brown, 2010)

Accountability

The Intelligence and Security Committee publishes annual and special reports at: <http://isc.independent.gov.uk/>

Peter Gill and Mark Phythian, *Intelligence in an Insecure World* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009) – particularly chapter 8, 'Can Intelligence be Democratic?'

Peter Gill, 'Evaluating Intelligence Oversight Committees: The UK Intelligence and Security Committee and the 'War on Terror.' *Intelligence and National Security*, 22:1 (2007)

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Intelligence Studies (Routledge, 2014); *Spying on the World: The Declassified Documents of the Joint Intelligence Committee, 1936-2013* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014); and *The Official History of the Joint Intelligence Committee, Volume 1: From the Approach of the Second World War to the Suez Crisis* (Routledge, 2014).

**People do not believe lies
because they have to,
but because they want to.**

— Malcolm Muggeridge, author, quoted in
Associated Press