

SECRET HISTORY

Writing the Rise of Britain's Intelligence Services

Simon Ball

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In the last 30 years or so academic writing on intelligence services in this country has gone from being a non-subject to an enormous field, far too big for any one person to cover. This book, I assumed from its title, was going to be a discussion of the development of that subject. Which would be rather interesting, I thought. My mistake. This is an account of the British intelligence and security services *writing about themselves* – in official reports, assessments and in-house histories.

As you would expect, to some extent it is a story of log-rolling, empire-building, white-washing and score-settling. As for reviewing it . . . had I the patience, I could list all the reports and their authors and précis this author's summaries of them. Taking the easier option, here are some of the sections I thought worthy of note while reading it. If I were to read it again I would probably mark different passages.

'The historical investigation of intelligence in the 1920s can be understood in terms of two interweaving processes: first, the production of the contemporary history of the Russian Revolution; and second, the series of internal inquiries into the place of intelligence in the British state.' (p. 41)

In 1919 . . . 'The entire Secret Vote was worth less than one-tenth of the cost of a Royal Navy cruiser. Army Field Intelligence amounted to 0.1 per cent of the Army Estimates.' (p. 54)

In 1945 . . . 'Despite the personal specificities of each history, a number of identifiable strands coalesced. Thus there was an SIS version of history, a Bletchley Park version of history, a Naval Intelligence version of history, a JIC version of history, an SOE version of history, and, finally, an MI5 version of history. Although the strands were distinct, however, the process of creating them was intertwined.

The dominant versions also left out a great deal. In September 1945, Churchill's personal advisor on intelligence, Desmond Morton, once influential but by 1945 peripheral, quipped about the neglect of his former

agency, the Industrial Intelligence Centre, "*Undank ist der Welten Lohn*" ("Nothing is so hard as man's ingratitude.")' (p. 100)

'The 1945 history of British intelligence was a history of how certain voices had come to speak for intelligence. It limned¹ out the boundaries of the field, striving to define who had been "in" and who had been "out". In one of his own reflections on intelligence, R.V. Jones observed that "the worldly wise are such rogues".' (p. 100)

By 1950 . . . 'Soviet agents were then detected in nearly all current and historical intelligence agencies: SIS, MI5, GC&CS, DMI, and SOE. By any measure, it was a testament to the woeful incompetence of the men who had run intelligence and had then commissioned its histories.

There was inevitably a re-evaluation. Notably, however, the settled version of history proved remarkably resilient in the face of new revelations. History proved to be an essential form of capital. The intelligence services were able to rely on three decades of writing about their successes to ride out contemporary commentary about their palpable failure.' (p. 173)

As well as the history of histories, there is an interwoven narrative about the various services' activities; so there is much about WW2 and Burgess and Maclean *et al.* Every now and then an interesting little snippet pops up. There's this for example. SIS abandoned Passport Control Office as its cover for officers abroad and put them under cover as Foreign Office.

'The trouble was that there were actually more SIS officers than core members of the Foreign Service. In 1950 there were 267 SIS officers operating under cover. Strang put the number of "key posts" in the Foreign Service at 125. The British Foreign Office was thus in danger of becoming similar to the foreign ministries of Soviet satellites: a shell for intelligence, with a boutique diplomatic service attached.' (p. 190)

If it sounds dry, it isn't really. And it's very nicely written. Reading this was an unexpected pleasure.

¹ I had to look that up: depict or describe in painting or words.

