

Defence Intelligence and the Cold War: Britain's Joint Intelligence Bureau 1945-1964

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Author: Huw Dylan

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Reviewer: Rory Cormac

Historians have been treated to a wealth of bureaucratic intelligence histories over the past five or so years. Each of Britain's three intelligence agencies have been the recent subject of a lengthy institutional history, one authorised (on MI5 by Christopher Andrew), one official (MI6 by Keith Jeffery), and one unofficial (GCHQ by Richard Aldrich). To this we can add the official history of the Joint Intelligence Committee – Britain's all-source intelligence assessment body – by Michael Goodman and an impressively ambitious history of Whitehall's intelligence machinery more broadly (*Intelligence and Government* by Philip Davies).

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The history of intelligence institutions is an increasingly crowded field. When considering Huw Dylan's new book the first question must surely be: do we need another institutional history of a – comparatively unknown – secret Whitehall department? The answer, as *Defence Intelligence and the Cold War* amply demonstrates, must be a resounding yes.

The Joint Intelligence Bureau (JIB) may have only existed for a few years during the Cold War, but it operated at the heart of secret Whitehall. Moreover, its successor, the Defence Intelligence Staff (now Defence Intelligence) remained a major intelligence player; home to Britain's career intelligence analysts. Despite this, the JIB has attracted very little scholarly attention. One assumes that, like the general public, historians have traditionally been more enthralled by the dramatic stories of human spies, traitors, and moles. Nonetheless, the JIB dealt with some of the most important – and dramatic – issues of the day, including the likelihood of a Third World War. Despite the recent glut of institutional histories, we know very little about the workings of the JIB. Huw Dylan's book admirably fills this gap.

First and foremost, the book is impeccably researched. This was no easy task and Dylan deserves much credit for exploring such a difficult subject (in terms of source availability). JIB papers are not neatly catalogued and are, in fact, dispersed across numerous Ministry of Defence, Cabinet Office, Air Ministry and Foreign Office holdings. Dylan has in a sense built his own archive from painstaking examination of hundreds (probably thousands) of documents looking for clues and snippets of JIB activity and input. In addition, Dylan has adopted a multi-archival approach, taking in various international archives and

numerous private papers, to ensure his analysis is continuously built on plenty of primary sources. As result, the book is rigorous, highly detailed, and rich in evidence. This is the definitive work on the JIB.

Defence Intelligence and the Cold War provides a thorough history of the JIB, Britain's Cold War scientific and technical intelligence bureau. The book begins with the Second World War and the origins of the JIB and ends in 1964 when the JIB merged into the new Defence Intelligence Staff. Dylan demonstrates how the JIB grew steadily in both remit and status, overcame bureaucratic obstacles, performed admirably during the Cold War, and pioneered the inter-agency cooperation which is so important today.

The formation of the JIB offers a positive antidote to those who think that Whitehall does not learn lessons from the past. Dylan traces how the JIB was created in response to failures, especially large shortcomings in topographical intelligence. It was created as a result of lesson learning from the Second World War (and the 1930s), including problems of duplication and the need to be prepared in peace. This latter idea, that a country in economic decline needs a first class peacetime intelligence system, remains highly relevant today.

The JIB was a hugely important organisation. Interested in economics, science, and technical issues rather than human intelligence, it may have lacked the supposed glamour of other intelligence actors. But it dealt with matters of life and death. Although Dylan's prose is often rather 'matter of fact', the JIB agenda included considering the total nuclear annihilation of the United Kingdom. As intelligence issues go, it does not get much bigger than that! Similarly, in chapter two, Dylan writes about a JIB study into which Soviet towns would burn best when bombed. These are important issues, with weighty consequences. JIB material starkly highlights how much was at stake at the height of the Cold War.

Through his analysis of the JIB's remit, Dylan reminds the reader that intelligence has long included much more than human spies and communications monitoring. For example, much of chapter two discusses JIB engagement in topography. This is an often overlooked source of intelligence, but, by placing it in its historical context, Dylan admirably demonstrates that topography formed a central part of intelligence long before the days of formalised agencies and the invention of spy planes. Moreover, Dylan highlights the real-world importance of topography as intelligence. Mapping railways, for example, revealed a country's readiness for war, whilst mapping the landscape proved crucial in targeting nuclear weapons – and ultimately for nuclear deterrence.

Similarly, Dylan demonstrates that the JIB drew heavily on open source intelligence. This is often considered a recent phenomenon born of the internet and technological revolutions. In reality however, the JIB engaged with such material from the late 1940s onwards. Chapter six offers interesting detail on the JIB's business links and how the bureau gathered open source intelligence through these informal channels. The reader is left wondering how open source intelligence was weighted by the JIB or used by the JIC however, especially, given that the intelligence community has long been criticised for downplaying open source material in favour of secret sources.

The breadth of the JIB's role is a key theme throughout the book. In addition to targeting and mapping the Soviet Union, the bureau developed a (more active) role in economic intelligence and export control, involving anything from controlling rubber exports to controlling shipping. The JIB's role expanded further to include scientific intelligence, atomic intelligence and even pharmaceutical control. For departments, agencies, and committees, Whitehall is a Darwinian world. The fact that the JIB expanded as it did is testament to its successes and the high regard in which it was held. Indeed, Dylan argues throughout that the JIB performed admirably. One such example includes the missile gap where, for various reasons outlined in the book, the JIB outperformed their American counterparts in the late 1950s.

Indeed, the relationship between Britain and America is another key theme in *Defence Intelligence and the Cold War*. Analysis of intelligence liaison is traditionally very difficult to achieve, not least because the relevant files are generally classified. Liaison has long been one of the most sensitive aspects of intelligence. Nonetheless, Dylan offers impressive detail on Anglo-American relations and also occasionally uses the

American case effectively to provide a point of comparison for British performance, development, and approaches. Dylan also attempts to paint a picture of the JIB at the heart of a global network of regional JIBs and dominion JIBs. Given the lack of surviving primary sources, this proved more difficult and, although Dylan performed admirably with the sources available, questions remain about their precise role, impact, and especially their relationships with other local or regional actors. *Defence Intelligence and the Cold War* does, however, remind readers that intelligence liaison is nothing new. International and transnational threats forced states to pool resources and work together long before 9/11 and the so-called new terrorism.

Similarly, Dylan also reminds readers that demand for centralisation and inter-agency cooperation is nothing new either. Similar debates were happening in Whitehall long before reports into 9/11 and the Iraq War criticised intelligence agencies for not talking to each other – or ‘stovepiping’ material. Dylan is right to paint the bureau and its head, Kenneth Strong, as a pioneer.

Chapters four and five offer important insight into where the JIB got its intelligence from. This is useful in so far as it places the JIB’s function within the broader intelligence cycle. For example, Dylan explains how intelligence on Soviet bombers was wide but not deep and offers an interesting overview of the types of intelligence available, including the rise of technical intelligence in the 1950s. The next stage of the intelligence cycle is analysis and assessment. Here, Dylan admits that few sources are available to elucidate JIB methodology. As a result, the analysis tends to treat the JIB as a unitary whole offering little sense of the debates which likely underpinned each document. Similarly, the book could go further (if possible) in discussing how the JIB product fed into the Joint Intelligence Committee system – another process characterised by debate, compromise and bargaining. The final reports may be based on consensus, but that often belies fierce inter- and intra-departmental rivalry at the report drafting stage.

After assessment comes dissemination and impact. All intelligence historians know how incredibly difficult it is to demonstrate exactly how intelligence was used and to prove an impact upon specific policy. Policy is shaped by numerous forces – some utterly intangible. Dylan impressively manages to achieve this in places – especially regarding the impact of economic intelligence on export policy. Here, the JIB clearly played an active role. More generally however, Dylan points to the JIB’s passive role. The JIB operated as a bank or database of intelligence built up cumulatively and over time. It gradually informed policy thinking in ways which are difficult to measure. This is a vital day-to-day task of intelligence – and one which is often overlooked in other books. The atmosphere amongst Whitehall consumers was highly politicised, especially regarding the types of issues discussed by the JIB. As a result, the JIB had to operate in difficult political environments. The impact of this on assessments and status could perhaps have come across slightly more strongly in places.

Major General Kenneth Strong, the JIB’s head and Eisenhower’s wartime intelligence man, features prominently from the preface. Dylan opens by sketching Strong’s personality and it is clear that the author sees Strong as highly influential in shaping the JIB’s role. This came across most clearly when discussing the JIB’s liaison with America and moves towards centralisation; both of which were driven by Strong personally. Dylan’s placement of Strong as the Brit closest to the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 offers an original perspective on a well-trodden topic. In fact, the whole treatment of the JIB as America’s eyes and ears on Cuba offered fresh insight into the crisis. When writing about committees it is essential to remember the men (for it was usually men at this point) who sat on them. It is important not to get lost in acronyms and bureaucracy. To his credit, Dylan does this with regard to Strong. Similarly, Lord Mountbatten, as Chief of the Defence Staff, comes through regarding centralisation – although the reason why he was so pro-reform never quite came across. Nonetheless, the impression is given that the JIB was very much a one man show. Strong dominated and provided the driving energy behind its expansion and role. In this sense, the book offers a potentially interesting case-study on the agency/structure debate.

Defence Intelligence and the Cold War is an impressive work. Impeccably researched and well-written, it fills a vital gap in our understanding of Cold War intelligence. If ever there is to be an official history of Defence Intelligence (surely the only one left to do), then Huw Dylan is the man – if willing!

Notes

The author is happy to accept this review, and hopes to write a longer response in due course.

1. Christopher Andrew, *The Defence of the Realm: The Authorized History of MI5* (London, 2009); Keith Jeffery, *MI6: The History of the Secret Intelligence Service 1909-1949* (London, 2010); Richard Aldrich, *GCHQ: the Uncensored Story of Britain's Most Secret Intelligence Agency* (London, 2010); Michael Goodman, *The Official History of the Joint Intelligence Committee: Volume I: From the Approach of the Second World War to the Suez Crisis* (London, 2014); Philip Davis, *Intelligence and Government in Britain and the United States: A Comparative Perspective* (Santa Barbara, CA, 2012).
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