

The Image of the Enemy: Intelligence Analysis of Adversaries since 1945

Review Number: 1935

Publish date: Thursday, 12 May, 2016

Editor: Paul Maddrell

ISBN: 9781626162389

Date of Publication: 2015

Price: £38.43

Pages: 312pp.

Publisher: Georgetown University Press

Publisher url: <http://press.georgetown.edu/book/georgetown/image-enemy>

Place of Publication: Washington, DC

Reviewer: Charlie Hall

In 1984, Ernest May published *Knowing One's Enemies* which examined intelligence assessments of enemies made by various nations before both the First and Second World Wars. From this study, May was able to establish a series of maxims concerning intelligence-gathering on one's adversaries, which he felt would offer valuable advice to intelligence agencies operating in the latter stages of the then-ongoing Cold War.⁽¹⁾ In the present study, Paul Maddrell and the various chapter authors have aimed to pay homage to May's work by examining intelligence assessments both in the Cold War and in other conflicts and contests around the world in the latter half of the 20th century, and have attempted to draw conclusions which may have bearing on the way this process is conducted today and into the future. In this respect, and in many others, the book is successful. The diversity of topics is a real strength, and themes and patterns which are readily evident could easily be used by the intelligence community (IC) to capitalise on strengths and avoid pitfalls going forward.

The first of these themes is the role ideology can play in clouding judgement when intelligence is directed at a state's primary enemy. Preconceptions of how cunning, nefarious, or hostile an enemy is provide a blurry lens through which to attempt to accurately perceive an adversary. Secondly, and compounding this first issue, is the often problematic relationship between the intelligence community and policymakers – depending heavily on the political atmosphere or governmental structure of a nation, it can be difficult for intelligence agencies to operate objectively or to convey their assessments effectively to the upper echelons of national power. The third theme is one that was initially identified by Ernest May, that intelligence agencies are usually better at understanding an enemy's resources, or 'capabilities', and less able to discern their intentions, or 'proclivities'. All of these themes recur throughout the eight chapters in varying forms, often with fresh perspectives, which serve to revitalise these established principles.

The book comprises eight chapters, each dealing with one nation and its assessments of one particular threat. The first four are firmly ensconced in the Cold War, considering Soviet appraisals of the United States, and vice versa, and East German appraisals of West Germany, and vice versa. This provides for neat comparisons and much discussion is granted to these first four studies in the book's introduction and conclusion. As such, the latter four chapters, which cover much more disparate subjects, such as British

appraisals of the Provisional IRA and Israeli appraisals of Palestinian terrorism, though incredibly valuable in themselves (particularly as they explore comparatively understudied areas), feel neglected in the overall discussion and thus somewhat cut adrift from the first four chapters. Perhaps this could have been mitigated by dividing the book into two distinct sections and providing a shorter introduction for each section, explaining both their separation and their connections.

As such, this review will consider the first and second group of chapters separately, as they tell generally different stories, although the themes identified above are present throughout. Firstly, Raymond L. Garthoff's chapter examines the relationship between the leadership of the Soviet Union and their intelligence apparatus, especially the KGB, with regard to assessments of the United States throughout the Cold War, but with a particular focus on Brezhnev's tenure as leader. On the whole, the KGB advocated a particularly harsh line towards the USA, known in Soviet nomenclature as the 'Main Adversary', which was often dismissed by the leadership, who based their assessments on personal impressions which, as Garthoff convincingly remarks, 'usually precluded serious deliberation of issues' (p. 39). As such the Soviet IC were very hostile towards détente, believing it was insincere and concealed more sinister moves by the Americans, and also failed to foresee the internal collapse of the USSR as they were too occupied chasing external chimeras (p. 56).

Benjamin Fischer provides the companion piece to Garthoff's chapter, by looking at the other side of the coin: American assessments of the Soviet threat between 1972 and 1991. Firstly, Fischer should be commended for guiding his readers comfortably through an absolute glut of acronyms and abbreviations which could otherwise stifle the message of the chapter. One key element which Fischer clearly highlights is that the American IC were more perceptive and objective in their understanding of the Soviet Union than vice versa; he attributes this, in part, to the plurality of agencies involved (which diminished the potential for 'groupthink') and the focus on 'estimative intelligence', a process based on the future projection of existing patterns. This is certainly supported by the evidence, especially that the CIA were able to see that Gorbachev's leadership was more likely to result in dissolution, rather than consolidation, of the USSR – in Fischer's words: their 'skeptical, and more sophisticated, analysis was prescient' (p. 120). One small flaw with this chapter is Fischer's overreliance on National Intelligence Estimates for evidence, which are perhaps too sanitised and bland to be particularly revealing.

If the United States and the USSR were the two largest protagonists of the Cold War, their rivalry was paralleled on a smaller scale by the two halves of Germany, with that divided country acting as both a microcosm and the crucible of the wider conflict. The similarities are certainly clear in Paul Maddrell's chapter on the intelligence services of the German Democratic Republic (GDR, or East Germany), primarily the Stasi, and their perceptions of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG, or West Germany). Maddrell begins his chapter by explaining that the GDR viewed itself almost exclusively in terms of comparison with the FRG – any success for the latter was a menace to the former, and any weakness of the latter was an opportunity for the former. This ideology amplified the perceived threat that the West posed to the East, and played a key role in shaping intelligence-gathering in the GDR. Maddrell argues that the 'most cherished delusion of all communist regimes was that dissent was stirred up from outside' (p. 83) coupled with a view of themselves as infallible, a commonality evidenced both by the KGB's failure to foresee the internal collapse of the USSR and the Stasi's failure to foresee the fall of the Berlin Wall. The main contention of this chapter, however, is that the biggest weakness of the Stasi was that they failed to evaluate their intelligence; instead they simply passed on information – acting more like journalists, pandering to the preferences of their readership, than analysts. This is an interesting and well-supported claim.

Across the Elbe, the main West German intelligence agency, the BND, faced its own set of problems, as explored by Matthias Uhl. It had no highly-placed assets in East Germany, having to rely on a sizeable network of lower-level informants; ideology of a different sort could be troublesome as, in the early years, many operatives were drawn from institutions of the Third Reich (Wehrmacht, SS, SD, and so on); and perhaps most importantly, the West German political elite, 'in accordance with German tradition, took virtually no account of intelligence information in its decision-making process' (p. 130). Uhl shows how this

changed somewhat under Helmut Kohl's leadership in the 1980s, as he was briefed weekly by the head of the BND and was able to use intelligence to handle the fall of the Wall in the way most beneficial to the Federal Republic. This chapter raises many interesting points but feels somewhat episodic (dealing, as it does, with four specific events throughout the Cold War) and a broader argument is less evident. On the whole, the first four chapters provide a comprehensive insight into both sides of the struggle for intelligence which formed an integral part of the Cold War. By examining both sides, on both a global and more regional level, it allows us to understand relative strengths and weaknesses and offers a new perspective on the fascinating international relations of this period.

The second set of chapters cover four topics which, although sharing very little in terms of content, do feature a range of similarities and points of comparison at a thematic level. For a start, they generally have much greater resonance in the present day, as they all refer to conflicts which still exist (in one form or another), whereas the first four chapters are almost exclusively historical studies, especially as both the USSR and GDR are no longer extant. In fact, only one of these latter chapters fits the 'state vs state' angle which dominates the first section – Julian Richards' examination of Pakistani intelligence on India. This is a case which shares plenty of DNA with the rivalry between East and West Germany, not only in that it emerged from the partition of a formerly unified entity, but also in that an ideology of perpetual struggle has deeply damaged the objectivity of intelligence reports – Richards argues that Pakistani perceptions have been 'muddled by a bellicose prevailing wisdom about India and its supposedly nefarious intentions' (pp. 219–20). This chapter also highlights, with great relevance, the importance of whether a nation's IC has both military and civilian elements. In Pakistan's case, intelligence is almost exclusively a military matter and, coupled with the fact that the country itself has often found itself under military administration, this means that accurate intelligence assessments have often fallen victim to 'a chauvinistic and embittered attitude towards the enemy' (p. 242).

In the other three chapters in the second set, the 'state vs state' model is abandoned in favour of studying the conflict between nations and technically stateless groups which present an altogether different threat and thus require a fresh approach to intelligence gathering. Eunan O'Haltin explores the relationship between the British IC, particularly MI6, and the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) throughout the period of the Troubles. Immediately, this chapter stands out as it directly tackles the issues of memory and myth within intelligence communities, addressing why the PIRA still looms so large in British popular perceptions of terrorism and the risks which this might pose to developing future intelligence strategy towards terrorist groups, thus adding considerable depth to the analysis and a different interpretation of how an established mindset can cloud judgement. As has been shown in earlier chapters, preconceptions often distorted views of the enemy; in this case, the severity of the threat posed by the PIRA was grossly inflated, largely because they were the only group which carried out attacks on mainland British soil and because of the prominence of their political arm, Sinn Féin. O'Haltin warns that this perspective lacks nuance and leads to the ignorance of lessons which could help in today's 'more perilous struggles against borderless terrorism across the world' (pp. 186–7).

Although PIRA attacks in Britain posed a very serious risk throughout the Troubles, and still do today, they pale in comparison next to the issue of Palestinian terrorism against Israel. In their chapter, Shlomo Spiro and Tamir Libel examine Israeli intelligence as a 'frontline weapon' (p. 192) against Palestinian terrorism, which has proved one of the most persistent sources of danger to the state of Israel since its inception in 1948. Spiro and Libel display a clear awareness of the unique position which Israel occupies, both historically and geographically, and address this with confidence throughout. They note that the principal role of Israel's intelligence services has always been to provide early warning of an impending attack, so as to provide time for mobilisation – 'every other intelligence activity is secondary to this key role in ensuring national survival' (p. 195). Palestinian terrorism has been, and still is, widely viewed in Israel as a perpetual threat which should be met with constant vigilance and readiness. However, as a result the approach of Israeli intelligence to the Palestinian threat has been almost solely military, assessing their weapons and resources, rather than the social, economic and political factors which might shape future actions. To use Ernest May's terminology, Spiro and Libel see Israeli intelligence as strong on Palestinian capabilities, but

less so on their proclivities.

This imbalance, which has been fairly evident, to a lesser or greater degree, throughout all the case studies so far is turned on its head in the final chapter. In what feels like a natural concluding part, Mark Stout looks at US intelligence on the jihadist threat and surmises that, though their motive is clear (often readily available online) – to convert the whole world to their interpretation of Islam – the extent of their capabilities and resources is often much trickier to ascertain, particularly when the risk of a jihadist group coming into possession of a WMD is considered. Stout's chapter also feels very fresh because he challenges the idea that intelligence assessments of an adversary always tend towards overestimation. Prior to 9/11, the American intelligence community (as well as policymakers) saw terrorism as a very minor threat, at least where it wasn't state-sponsored, and felt that religion had no part to play in national security. After September 2001, that view changed rapidly and overestimation became the norm, with jihadism being linked to 'rogue states and adversaries on literally every inhabited continent' (p. 258). Stout provides us with a comprehensive and lucid assessment of an issue which is deeply problematic, on account of both its immediacy and the lack of source material.

Overall, *The Image of the Enemy* presents an excellent thematic sequel to Ernest May's 1984 book and a valuable addition to the historiography of modern intelligence. It is both a work of clear historical analysis as well as a catalogue of strengths and weaknesses, the understanding of which would be of great benefit to members of the intelligence community across the world today. By focusing on intelligence assessments of one's primary adversary, it highlights a factor which is often forgotten in the study of intelligence – the human role in evaluating raw intelligence material, understanding how it fits into the bigger picture, and then acting on it accordingly. This is a process which involves not only intelligence operatives but also policymakers, and as various chapters in this book have shown, these groups can be guilty of not evaluating the intelligence at all, or ignoring that which does not fit with their ideologically-shaped preconceptions, or not responding to it at the appropriate policy level, or all three. What this book convincingly shows above all is that intelligence communities worldwide are deeply fallible and never more so than when considering their main enemy.

Among this book's many strengths is the diversity of its subject matter. By including both the classic dichotomy of the Cold War and the more nebulous struggles against both regional and global terrorism, it shows the reader that intelligence takes many forms but that there are many shared themes and approaches. However, this advantage can also be seen as a point of criticism. Because of the variation between these topics, the introduction and conclusion should serve to bring them together and make the connections between them explicit. Instead, the introduction focuses heavily on the first four chapters, which already form a neat, mirrored grouping and neglects the latter half of the book, adding to the sense that these chapters don't quite belong here. This is, of course, only a minor issue and one that does little to mar what is otherwise an excellent collection of studies, all of which are both meticulously researched and lucidly presented. Moreover, with the emergence of new threats in the Middle East, as well as increasing tensions between Russia and the NATO countries, this book feels incredibly timely and reminds the reader that intelligence on one's enemies is both vitally important and inherently flawed.

Notes

1. *Knowing One's Enemies: Intelligence Assessments Before the Two World Wars*, ed. Ernest May (Princeton, NJ, 1984). [Back to \(1\)](#)

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1935>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/146129>