Historical Dictionary of Signals Intelligence

Nigel West (Scarecrow Press, 2012), 340 pp., bibliography, index.

Reviewed by Gary K.

Nigel West is the well-known author of many books on intelligence. He has authored or coauthored nine of the 16 historical dictionaries published by the Scarecrow Press on intelligence topics and so is well-placed to attempt perhaps the most difficult of all historical intelligence dictionary subjects: the highly classified field of signals intelligence (SIGINT). West does not shrink from the challenge; he takes on not just British SIGINT, and not even just British and US SIGINT. In fact, West has attempted to corral the SIGINT activities of most of the world's nations over the past century. No volume could manage such a difficult task well, particularly given how closely guarded the subject is—very little of what the world's SIGINT agencies have done since WW II has been declassified.

It is obvious, but needs to be stated, that what is available in primary sources determines, and limits, what West—or anyone writing about SIGINT—is able to use. West recognizes this and says so. His bibliographic essay acknowledges the challenge: "Because of its sensitive nature, relatively little has been published about SIGINT" and "detailed SIGINT studies are rare indeed."(275) West's bibliography for the entire Cold War tells more of the story. It lists only about 20 sources, while he lists more than 50 for the much narrower VENONA program.

A significant and surprising gap in West's otherwise fair-minded selection of sources is the lack of references to histories of SIGINT written by NSA historians. Given that the American SIGINT system, as closed as it may be, is probably the most open of all of those services worldwide, one would have expected a nod to them—they actually know what has happened in US SIGINT since WW II. His bibliography notes only two of NSA's historical publications. The first is Thomas R. Johnson's *American Cryptology during the Cold War, 1945–1989*. Oddly, West notes in one place that the work was "declassified," (285) when, in fact, it was redacted, i.e., still classified materials were deleted; in an earlier reference to that volume, (163) he had it right. Much of Johnson's history indeed remains classified. West also notes Frederick D. Parker's monograph, *A Priceless Advantage: US Navy Communications Intelligence and the Battles of Coral Sea, Midway, and the Aleutians*, (288) and acknowledges William Friedman, (286) Robert Benson and Michael Warner, (290–91) Hayden Peake, (291) and many veterans of the WW II SIGINT effort. WW II, however, is not where the information gap is.

The works of these IC writers are excellent, but NSA's Center for Cryptologic History maintains on its unclassified website[1] many additional unclassified or redacted histories—some monographs, and some shorter works that NSA calls brochures—yet West mentions none of them in his bibliographic essay or period bibliographies. If one is interested in US SIGINT history, in this reviewer's judgment, the Center for Cryptologic History is the place to start.

Still, in providing an introductory essay, a chronology, more than 300 entries, appendices, and, importantly, a bibliography, West has made the best of a difficult subject. His dictionary samples a wide field and will be worthwhile for most scholarly and public educational uses. Also, importantly, West has maintained a sober, balanced, dispassionate—and therefore credible—tone throughout and avoided the breathless, alarmist language of many works on intelligence, especially SIGINT.

The following small sampling of West's 300 entries illustrates his welcome tone and supplies a good sense

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[1] The Center for Cryptologic History's unclassified collection can be found at www.nsa.gov.

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of the work's strengths and weaknesses. On the plus side are:

• a nice paragraph on Abner, an early, important, computer. (9) Helpful details like this on obscure, seemingly inconsequential topics are sprinkled throughout the dictionary. They are only unimportant until one needs to know about them.

• a perhaps too succinct but still helpful entry on the Cold War (61–62). A goodly number of other entries—e.g., on the Cuban Missile Crisis, US military SIGINT organizations, and various specific episodes—flesh out the picture, though even with those, many gaps will remain in the Cold War story for years.

• an excellent entry on Vietnam (228–33) gives an idea of the kind of detail that could be known about SIGINT if more declassified primary records became available. Of course, volumes could be written about SIGINT (American, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Soviet) during the Vietnam War, but the level of detail West has provided in this entry indicates that in some areas primary sources are sufficient to provide firm ground for public knowledge.

Examples that illustrate the challenges caused by dearth of available source material include:

• too brief an entry on Russia's GRU (the military's General Staff Main Intelligence Directorate, which conducts human and signals intelligence operations abroad) (115), which, one imagines, would warrant volumes if the information were available.

• too brief a mention of the largest and probably most effective Soviet SIGINT site outside of the Soviet Union, in Lourdes, Cuba, which probably targeted the eastern seaboard of the United States and possibly Latin America, as well. Only noted in an entry

on FAPSI (the Russian Federation's signals collection organization), the site operated continuously for many years. Undoubtedly, West could find relatively little primary information about Lourdes, and not surprisingly, the Russians have not deigned to release any of it. In any case, Lourdes deserved its own entry, even if only a cross-reference to FAPSI.

A number of topics could have been treated more fully and some were not treated at all even though supporting information is available. For example:

• the Black Chamber, the first US Cryptologic organization, about which much is known, receives only a seven-line entry. (36–37)

• the United Kingdom's SIGINT agency, the GCHQ, is covered in an overview, (109–12) which, while solid, is briefer than it could be. In addition, the bibliography fails to include Richard J. Aldrich's significant, 665-page study, *GCHQ*, published in 2010, although West does list a 30-page article that Aldrich published in 2010 on the same subject.

• Korea has no entry.

It is not hard to see how this dictionary could be expanded upon for many years to come as more information about SIGINT is released and as time allows consideration of things that might have been included in this edition but were left out. Among them might be many other known instances of SIGINT activity from WW I through WW II, including those of non-allied combatants whose efforts, beyond a few big stories, still remain relatively unknown in English. Also of value would be entries on Cold War communist SIGINT efforts against NATO and ASEAN nations. In the end, though, for all its shortcomings, this volume is nevertheless a sound first step.

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