

The Pursuit of Intelligence History: Methods, Sources, and Trajectories in the United Kingdom

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This article is an overview of the history of the academic study of intelligence in the United Kingdom since 1945, a time marked by three distinctive periods of historiography. Each, labelled here as Absence, Emergence, and Efflorescence, has contained unique themes and approaches to intelligence history as it has been practiced in Britain.^a

Clarity has come to intelligence history much like the restoration of an aged fresco in which hidden details are gradually revealed through repeated cleansings until a full-bodied picture emerges. Attempts to establish the history of British intelligence have ranged greatly in style and quality, from the lurid works served up by the media and by the purveyors of conspiracy theory (appropriately described by Nicholas Hiley as “lightweight meals that sit so heavily on the stomach”),¹ to the tomes, written by official historians and born of patient work in archives and historical scholarship.

Writers on intelligence have been a fissiparous bunch, their focus and approach shaped to a large extent by forces and events in the real world. In the 1960s and 1970s, as public fascination with and fear about espionage grew exponentially following a string of high-profile fiascoes (including the U-2 spy plane incident in May 1960, the abortive Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961, the John Vassall spy case in 1962, and the Profumo Affair in 1963), many authors made their names by looking at scandal.

*For the likes of Andrew Boyle— whose book *The Climate of Treason: Five who Spied for Russia* led to the public unmasking in 1979 of Anthony Blunt as a former Soviet agent—writing intelligence history was both a professional and a political activity, designed to shake the Establishment by shining a harsh and bright light on its unethical*

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The endnotes are available in the digital version of the article in cia.gov.

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practices.² In the mid- to late 1970s and then into the 1980s, as governments lifted the lid on Allied codebreaking successes during the Second World War, so historians paid much closer attention to the role of intelligence. Similarly, in the 1990s, as the British intelligence services themselves began to edge toward the light—they were first listed in the statute books, for example, and began declassifying hitherto secret records—so the nascent discipline of intelligence studies entrenched itself in academia.

In the 21st century, the history of Britain's intelligence services has enjoyed a revival in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Madrid, and London, as well as the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Thanks to the spooks of today, the spies of the past are no longer the supporting cast in some larger drama of international relations but are front and center on the historical stage.

Intelligence history, while presently booming, is fast approaching another tipping point. With the official histories of the Security Service (MI5), the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS/MI6) and the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) hitting bookshelves in 2009, 2010, and 2013 respectively, much of the original fresco will have been restored. For the intelligence historian, therefore, plotting the

future of the past has never been more important.

Absence

For a long time, intelligence history was the Cinderella of disciplines of history, starved of recognition and marginalized by its more successful scholarly sisters. In 1984, Christopher Andrew and David Dilks famously described intelligence as the “missing dimension” in historical inquiry, conspicuous in its absence from the literature of both modern government and international relations.³ Filling this significant lacuna was a task for which few serious historians had the stomach. Throughout much of the 20th century, the UK intelligence community was the “invisible man” of government, a state within a state, and an entity about which questions were never asked, even in Parliament.

Secret service work was wreathed in a miasma of secrecy; its practitioners—like members of a collegiate society—were spectral figures, known only to their exclusive fraternal initiates. “It is the essence of a Secret Service,” declared Sir Austen Chamberlain (then foreign secretary) in December 1924, “that it must be secret, and if you once begin

disclosure it is perfectly obvious to me as to honorable members opposite that there is no longer any Secret Service and that you must do without it.”⁴

Governments, irrespective of their political persuasion, refused to avow the very existence of the intelligence agencies. As Sir Frank Newsam (then Home Office permanent undersecretary) wrote in October 1952: “I was brought up in the tradition that the existence of the Security Service should never be mentioned save in the highest circles, and, for a very long time, I never knew its address and have only recently entered its portals.”⁵ It was often said that the British attitude toward intelligence mirrored societal attitudes toward marital sex; that is, everyone knew that it went on, but to “speak, write or ask questions about it” was not done.⁶

Much to the chagrin of independent historians, the taboo of secrecy surrounding intelligence was undergirded by the indefinite closure of service records. No matter how old or how sensitive, all documents that referred to intelligence found themselves in a historical never-never land, withheld indefinitely from release to the Public Record Office (PRO), now The National Archives (TNA).⁷ Section 3 (4) of the Public Records Act (1958, 1967), otherwise known as the “blanket” exemption, gave the

lord chancellor discretionary power to hold back any file related to intelligence or the intelligence services. In 1982, the Wilson Committee on Modern Public Records highlighted absurd examples of closed material, including postal intercept files from the 18th century and intelligence bulletins from the Battle of Waterloo. The dearth of primary source material discouraged even the most intrepid historian, to whom accessible documentation was the lifeblood of good scholarship.

Keeping the intelligence services walled off from public view was generally defended on the grounds of operational security. The agencies claimed, with some justification, that intelligence gathering would be jeopardized if its sources or methods were disclosed. In the field of human intelligence (HUMINT), for example, the identification of an individual as a secret agent is very often a matter of life or death.

Indeed, since the danger of retribution against a spy is not necessarily restricted to a single generation, one should not assume that the passage of time concurrently diminishes the hazards of disclosure. Without a promise of absolute secrecy, moreover, it was feared that agent recruitment would diminish and service morale plummet. "Secrecy is the breath of life to the clandestine war-

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rior," intoned RAdm. A. H. Taylor in June 1945: "It is necessary for his own morale as well as for his security that he should know it will be faithfully observed."⁸

Whitehall's commitment to keeping intelligence matters secret was so unyielding that officials often went to remarkable lengths to prevent disclosures from occurring. Nothing illustrates this better than the *Spycatcher* affair of 1986–88, when then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher tried unsuccessfully to suppress the memoir of Peter Wright, an embittered former assistant director of MI5. Ghost written by Paul Greengrass (who would later direct the Jason Bourne films), *Spycatcher* alleged that the late Sir Roger Hollis, a past director general of the service, had been a Soviet mole, and it accused MI5 of plotting against, snooping on, and defaming then Prime Minister Harold Wilson in the mid-1970s.⁹

Wright's allegations were neither novel nor discernibly damaging to national security. In March 1981, Fleet Street's greatest scoop-merchant, Chapman Pincher, published *Their Trade is Treachery*, which forced Thatcher to admit in Parliament that Hollis had been investigated some years

earlier as a possible Russian spy.¹⁰ Unlike Pincher, however, Wright was an insider who had taken a lifelong oath of silence and whose account was less easily "deniable." In 1987, therefore, Her Majesty's Government (HMG) banned *Spycatcher* in the UK, prohibited newspaper reportage with a series of gag orders, and sought a court injunction to halt the book's publication in Australia.

The insistence on a blanket ban was ludicrous. *Spycatcher* had already been published in the United States and ranked first on *The New York Times* best sellers list; thousands of copies had crossed the Atlantic and were washing up in second-hand bookstores.¹¹ The affair descended into complete farce when Cabinet Secretary Sir Robert Armstrong was dispatched to an Australian court to present the government's case.

Famously, Armstrong endured a torrid time, harried by a brash young advocate and ridiculed by the world's media for refusing to accept that SIS existed. Armstrong's credibility was fatally undermined when, under cross-examination, he was forced to concede, in a priceless admission, that he had been "economical with the truth." Since open sales of *Spy-*

"Toffs to a man, Guy Burgess, Donald Maclean, Philby, Blunt and John Cairncross had all advanced because they had attended the right schools and the right gentlemen's clubs." (Guy Burgess on left, Kim Philby on the right.)



Images © Bettmann/Corbis

catcher overseas had rendered moot the question of secrecy, attempts to squelch publication ultimately failed and brought mockery upon intelligence taboos.

With historians deprived of documents and governments determined to choke off public debate, the "history" of Britain's intelligence services was written largely by investigative journalists and "exposé merchants," relying on inside information obtained from well-connected friends in Whitehall. With an impish pleasure in wreaking havoc, authors such as Pincher, Nigel West, and Andrew Boyle focused on subjects perfectly calculated to rile the Establishment, including the Wilson Plot, the Cambridge Five, and the purported duplicity of Roger Hollis. (Now in his nineties, Pincher remains con-

vinced that Hollis was a Soviet agent.)¹²

Sometimes referred to pejoratively as the "airport bookstall" school of intelligence historiography,¹³ this genre of spy literature first came to prominence in the 1960s, a period known as the "era of exposure" for the intelligence and security agencies.¹⁴ In the United States, the CIA's ill-fated attempt to overthrow Cuban dictator Fidel Castro at the Bay of Pigs made front-page news, as did the shoot-downs of the U-2 and the RB-47 in 1960. Later in the decade, as the public became increasingly disillusioned with the war in Vietnam, and as stories emerged that US-sponsored covert action was propping up corrupt regimes in Central and South America, the CIA was

seen in certain quarters as symbolic of a nation losing its way.

In Britain, the early 1960s were punctuated by a series of real-life spy scandals, beginning with the exposure of George Blake as a Soviet spy in 1961 and culminating with the revelation in 1963 that the secretary of state for war, John Profumo, had shared his prostitute girlfriend, Christine Keeler, with a Russian spymaster. By the late 1960s, things got worse. In 1967, the *Daily Express* revealed that the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) routinely intercepted thousands of private cables, setting in motion a chain of events that brought personal obloquy upon Harold Wilson and very nearly spelled the end for the D-Notice Committee, the joint government/media body whose purpose was to prevent the public disclosure of information that would adversely affect the defense of the realm. A year later, Kim Philby, the ruthless SIS traitor and "Third Man" who had defected to the Soviet Union in January 1963, published his KGB-blessed memoir, *My Silent War*, which remorselessly revealed the details of SIS personnel and relationships and his own role as a Russian spy for over 30 years.

Philby and his band of turncoats became a "magnetic specter"¹⁵ to a generation of sensation-seeking writers. Just about every "airport bookstall"

author with basic literary ability—and some without—tried to make a quick buck by peddling tall tales of treachery, betrayal, murder, and whatnot. In pursuit of the “Fourth Man” (eventually revealed as Anthony Blunt), accounts tended to focus on the cloistered quadrangles of Cambridge in the 1930s and on the secret societies, such as the Apostles, that became Marxist cells for the disaffected moneyed elite. The spate of books that were produced on Philby were in the main deeply critical of the spy, suggesting that he had handed over thousands of state secrets and caused hundreds of deaths.

In what many regard as an unforgivable apologia that may have cost him a knighthood and a Nobel Prize, the novelist Graham Greene was a lone voice in depicting Philby as a misunderstood idealist, or “passionate pilgrim,” who sacrificed everything for the cause of the oppressed proletariat.¹⁶ Greene—a close friend of Philby, following Greene’s time in SIS during the Second World War—compared the spy to a persecuted Catholic in Elizabethan England.

By many accounts, the real sin of the Cambridge Five was not betraying their country, but betraying their class.¹⁷ The motivation for disclosure was to expose the Establishment for being so blinded by class prejudice that it failed to spot treach-

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ery within its ranks. Toffs to a man, Guy Burgess, Donald Maclean, Philby, Blunt and John Cairncross had all advanced because they had attended the right schools and the right gentlemen’s clubs. Similarly, many accounts of the Profumo Affair were not espionage yarns per se, but commentaries on Britain’s moral landscape, critiquing those who had become sexually liberated and Bohemian long before it was fashionable.

By the late 1970s, the spread of “mole mania,” coupled with the felicitous cresting of the James Bond phenomenon, arguably had created an unquenchable public thirst for sensational tales of espionage, a trend that continues today. As Oliver Hoare argues, “Racy histories of secret services...have often been the norm.”¹⁸ In academic circles, “airport bookstall” accounts were frequently met with ridicule or outright hostility, and served only to devalue the credibility of intelligence as a respectable field of inquiry. In the years to come, it is possible scholars will rehabilitate the “airport bookstall” school as a form of “protohistory” which, despite its flaws, facilitated the public emergence of Britain’s intelligence agencies and the writings of the

first professional intelligence historians.

Emergence

By the late 1980s, intelligence history had started to come of age, demonstrating how attention to the form and function of espionage could challenge existing orthodoxies about international relations and modern governance. Its ascent was in part the corollary of seismic events in the United States. In 1975, the Senate’s famous Church Committee hearings exposed some of the CIA’s most dubious, if not outright illegal activities, including the surveillance of domestic dissidents and the covert subversion of foreign governments. Church’s festival of revelation was transformative for the US intelligence community and “provided scholars, in the Western world, at least, with hitherto absent incentives and reasons to study intelligence.”¹⁹

Revealing World War II History

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Oxford don, John Masterman, published *The Double-Cross System in the War of 1939–45*, an account of the highly successful XX Committee and its turning of German spies into double agents during World War II.²⁰ With outstanding social connections (then Prime Minister Edward Heath was a former student), Masterman was persona grata to members of the Establishment who shared the author's desire to champion the achievements of the system and to head off erroneous "outsider" histories.

Two years later, Group Captain Frederick Winterbotham, a former intelligence officer at the Government Code and Cypher School at Bletchley Park, was allowed to publish the first English-language work dedicated to the Ultra secret—"the greatest secret of World War Two after the atom bomb"²¹—and the influence of Enigma decryption on the course of the war.²² Although hagiographic and unreliable in places (Winterbotham was accused of lacking "the most elementary technical knowledge" of cryptography, as well as downgrading the Polish and French contributions in breaking German ciphers),²³ *The Ultra Secret* represented a significant milestone in the pursuit of intelligence history. Ultra ranked as one of the best-

kept secrets of all time. In July 1945, amid concerns that its revelation might preclude post-war rapprochement with Germany (whose leaders might claim that they were not "well and fairly beaten," à la 1918), the JIC had considered it "imperative that the fact that such intelligence was available should NEVER be disclosed."²⁴

Published after 1945, the official histories of the Second World War were carefully doctored to maintain state security and thus contained no mention of Bletchley Park. Despite his reputation as something of a loose cannon, a man wanting in constraint and fickle in his loyalties to the rules of censorship, Winston Churchill was silent on the subject in his multivolume memoir of the conflict. As David Reynolds argues, for such a great aficionado of Signals Intelligence (SIGINT), Churchill made a "considerable sacrifice," a point not lost on Bletchley Park veterans who, should their wartime prime minister have spilled the beans, may have followed suit.²⁵

Winterbotham's account opened up a brand new chapter in the public's understanding of WW II and provoked a groundswell of academic interest in the role of intelligence, counter-intelligence, and deception. Knowing the Allies had been in

possession of event-influencing information, military historians who had been enamored of a particular general or admiral lost faith, igniting a firestorm of historical revisionism.

Opening Archives

With the Ultra secret in the public domain, Whitehall, perhaps unexpectedly, began to reassess its approach to intelligence archives. Although spread over many years so "as to generate the minimum public interest,"²⁶ from the mid-1970s HMG started to declassify its Great War SIGINT record, the Room 40 O.B. archive. In 1977, the first batch of Enigma decrypts and other Ultra-related material was released to the National Archives. Two years later, ministers took a bolder step in authorizing the publication of the first volume of Professor Sir Harry Hinsley's official history, *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, researched and written with the help of several able hands who, like Hinsley, had served at Bletchley Park during the war.²⁷

The brainchild of former Cabinet Secretary Sir Burke Trend, Hinsley's multivolume tome had been conceived as a "counterblast" against the deluge of salacious outsider accounts.²⁸ Depending upon who was spinning the tale, British intelligence was increasingly seen as a safe haven for disillusioned toffs more accustomed to dis-

gorging secrets to the enemy than defending the realm. In his widely read “Karla Trilogy” (1974–79), for example, John le Carré explored a world of betrayal, treason, and murder, peopled by those who become what they behold. Fair but forthright, unfailingly well written, and meticulously researched (Hinsley and his team had been granted unrestricted access to official papers), *British Intelligence in the Second World War* won wide-ranging praise from academia’s most knowledgeable and discerning commentators. CIA officer-turned-scholar Walter Pforzheimer called it “the single greatest work on intelligence ever produced,” and it set the benchmark by which all other works on the subject are judged.²⁹

Hacking into Other Sources

Hinsley’s history firmly contested the para-historian’s attempt to annex intelligence to the domain of “airport book-stall” literature and piqued the curiosity of an emerging generation of professional researchers. In the 1980s and early 1990s, scholars became less inclined to scoff and increasingly skilled at what one scholar has termed “archival intelligence hacking.”³⁰ Hacker in chief was Christopher Andrew, Hinsley’s heir apparent, but the roll also included David Stafford, Julian Lewis and Bradley Smith. Drawing upon private papers as well as

Hinsley’s [below] multivolume British Intelligence in the Second World War had been conceived as a “counterblast” against the deluge of salacious outsider accounts.

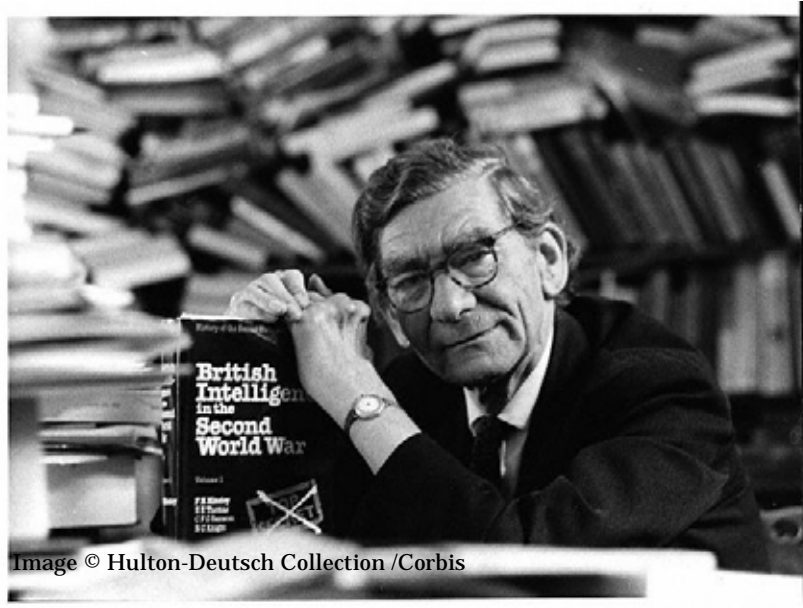


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so-called “adjacent” records, such as Foreign Office and Treasury files, the aforementioned demonstrated that there was sufficient declassified material to “fill in both the general outline of the missing intelligence dimension and much of its operational detail.”³¹

Private collections were particularly bountiful, as long as an author was prepared to weed through, canvass, and weight each folio of inchoate documents; statesmen of the first rank, including Winston Churchill and Anthony Eden, had routinely taken copies of confidential documents home with them—copies which, unbeknownst to the Cabinet Office, were often retained among

those officials’ personal papers. For example, in Eden’s stockpile, formally deposited in the Birmingham University Library in 1990, was the first page of Sir Edward Bridges’ Top Secret report into the disappearance of SIS frogman Lionel “Buster” Crabb (not officially declassified until 2006).

Authors with a penchant for lateral thinking also started to prize UK records out of the archives and libraries of foreign states. With its sunshine laws and landmark Freedom of Information Act, signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson on 4 July 1966, America was increasingly seen as an Aladdin’s cave—or wonderland—where any number of

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jewels could be found.³² The archive of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the wartime counterpart of SIS and forerunner of the CIA, was said to contain “not just isolated documents,” but quite often “entire files of British material.”³³ In his biography of Sir Stewart Graham Menzies (“C” during and after World War Two), the globe-trotting writer Anthony Cave Brown showed that Special Operations Executive (SOE) materials were available for public inspection in the papers of C’s American equivalent, William J. Donovan, which were housed at the US Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.³⁴

The desire to open up the “missing dimension” enveloped Christopher Andrew in writing what became a massively detailed history of the British intelligence services. Published in 1985 and stretching to over 700 pages, *Secret Service: The Making of the British Intelligence Community* demonstrated the value of sustained and creative archival research.³⁵ In 1986, Andrew cofounded *Intelligence and National Security*, the first (and now preminent) academic journal in the field. The premise of its first issue was that intelligence represented a “proper” subject of study for scholars in

political history and kindred disciplines.

Others soon shared this sentiment. As Keith Jeffrey has argued, a “conclusive indicator” of the subject’s newfound legitimacy was the acceptance of articles by traditional periodical outlets.³⁶ In 1986, for example, both *The Journal of Contemporary History* and *The English Historical Review* published articles on intelligence for the first time.³⁷ The proliferation of conferences was also instrumental in ushering in a growing scholarly appreciation for espionage-related topics.

This is not to say, however, that the first generation of seri-

ous scholarship was problem-free and beyond critical self-examination. As stated by John Lewis Gaddis, the “British School of Intelligence Studies” (as it became known) lent itself to “buffism,” preoccupied with a love of particular and esoteric terminology.³⁸ Many works—framed within the parameters of organizational theory and institutional practice—elided context and expended little effort in showing how the intelligence services made a difference. In consequence, they were beyond the ken of the average student.

Published fitfully between 1979 and 1990, the five volumes produced by Hinsley and his assistants were a monument to the triumph, but also to the inherent problems of intelli-



In December 1991 Stella Rimington became the first spy chief to be publicly named; the first to pose openly for cameras; and the first to publish a brochure. Image © Capital Pic/Corbis Sygma

gence history in its earliest manifestation. As Ralph Erskine noted of Volume 3, “Hinsley makes too few judgments, and his book is definitely not bedside reading. Order of battle appreciations loom all too large.”³⁹ The pursuit of intelligence history, therefore, demanded not only the centrifugal instinct to locate minutiae in the archives, but also a centripetal inclination to contextualize those details for a readership that might not be cognizant of the basic contours and outlines.

Efflorescence

In recent years, the discipline of intelligence studies has gone from strength to strength, becoming a magnet for post-graduate students and postdoc-

toral researchers around the world, and producing an impressive and varied literature. The steady stream of scholarship that has accrued over the past two decades has coincided with an ever-growing public awareness about intelligence. Following the high drama of 1989 and the end of the Cold War, the intelligence and security services entered a new phase in their history. As borders opened and free elections ousted communist regimes across Eastern Europe, the UK intelligence community confidently anticipated a period of relative geopolitical calm and, in turn, placed greater emphasis on accountability and transparency.

This new era of optimism and openness had a physical metonym: the Berlin Wall.⁴⁰

In the same year SIS and GCHQ entered the UK’s statute books (1994), SIS moved into a gleaming new building at Vauxhall Cross (left). GCHQ moved into its new facility, unsurprisingly called the “Donut” by many, in 2003. The prominence of the structures bespoke the emergence of both institutions into public and academic eyes. Images © Corbis.



During the Cold War, as made famous by John le Carré’s novel *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (1963), the Wall was the literal and symbolic epicenter of the great game of espionage; by the early 1990s it had been torn down. The lifting of the veil in the UK began in 1989, when MI5 was placed, for the first time, on a legislative footing. The Security Service Act (1989) came into being partly as a response to complaints about unauthorized government surveillance. Four years earlier, MI5 had faced a barrage of media scrutiny when a former officer, Cathy Massiter, provided evidence before the European Court of Human Rights that the service had been illegally bugging the telephones of pressure groups, such as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), as well as political “high fliers,” including Patricia Hewitt and Harriet Harman, then leading members of the National Council for Civil Liberties.

In the 18 months following her appointment as director general of MI5 in December 1991, Stella Rimington became the first spy chief to be publicly named; the first to pose openly for cameras; and the first to publish a brochure, entitled *MI5: The Security Service* (1993), describing the organization’s activities.⁴¹ Perhaps even more surprisingly, on 7 May 1992, then Prime Minister John Major acknowledged in Parlia-

Since 2001, few subjects have commanded so much attention and controversy as intelligence.

ment that Sir Colin McColl was the incumbent head of SIS.⁴² Hitherto, McColl and his predecessors had been ritually referred to as “C,” the fabled code name that originated with Captain Sir Mansfield Cumming, the first director of the service.

In 1994, SIS and GCHQ joined the MI5 on the statute book, while the Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC) was established to oversee the “policy, administration and expenditure” of the three agencies.⁴³ It should be said that the British glasnost was not in isolation; the collapse of communism prompted most Central and Eastern European secret services, previously little more than Soviet surrogates, to enshrine their responsibilities and powers in statute.

Underpinning this new spirit of openness was a perception that intelligence as a whole was becoming less important. For statesmen and practitioners alike, the passing of Marxism-Leninism from the Soviet Union, the diminution of the likelihood of large-scale conflict between states, and the purported universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of government all pointed to a “New World Order” in which intelligence would take a backseat.

By the early 2000s, however, this belief had been shown to be naïve. The post-Cold War era had not brought an end to conflict or instability, nor had it confirmed “the end of history,” in which secular free-market democracy reigned unchallenged. The intelligence services, having lost the stabilizing force of a common enemy, found themselves required to adapt to a host of new threats, from the development of corruption, cartels, and mafias in transitioning countries, to the global spread of terrorism, organized crime, drug smuggling, and human trafficking.

Terrorism and Iraq

Since 2001, few subjects have commanded so much attention and controversy as intelligence. The terrorist attacks of 9/11, Madrid, and in London, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, debates about weapons of mass destruction (WMD), domestic surveillance, and secret detention and rendition have all brought unwelcome notoriety and exposure to the intelligence services. In a world of media plenty, the importance, but also the limitations and abuses of intelligence, have never been more visible. In the face of threats from militant jihadists, public expectations of intelligence have soared to an all-time high, as have calls for greater transparency about

what is being done to combat this menace.⁴⁴

The British government has played an instrumental, if not always positive, role in dragging its intelligence community into the sunlight. In the summer of 2003, members of the administration of then Prime Minister Tony Blair, in particular Downing Street’s then Director of Communications and Strategy Alastair Campbell, came under heavy fire amid allegations that intelligence on Iraqi WMD had been deliberately twisted—or “sexed up”—in its representation to the public in order to present an exaggerated case for military action. The row centered on the publication of two highly contentious dossiers, which, using intelligence-derived information (including both HUMINT gathered by SIS and—for the first time—JIC assessments), claimed that Iraq had reconstituted its nuclear weapons program and could “deploy [chemical and biological] weapons within 45 minutes of a decision to do so.”⁴⁵

Asking the JIC to produce material for public consumption was an act without parallel in British politics. Blair, writes Christopher Andrew, “finally laid to rest the traditional taboo that British governments do not mention their intelligence services.”⁴⁶ As the months passed without any sign of the weapons about

which Blair and his security apparatchiks had ominously warned, breaking this taboo proved disastrous. Ministers were accused of “spinning” intelligence to sell the war on a false premise, and the intelligence services, historically unswayed by the interests of any political party or class, were criticized for compromising their independence and succumbing to political influence.

As Richard Aldrich argues, “the opening up of intelligence has followed the law of unintended consequences.”⁴⁷ Intending only to disclose selected snippets of information, the government instead put intelligence into a goldfish bowl, encouraging the ceaseless scrutiny of an increasingly inquisitorial Parliament and a decreasingly deferential media. Symbolizing the slide towards greater openness, the Hutton Inquiry, which reported on 28 January 2004, posted online virtually all of its evidence, including sensitive documents written only weeks before.

In a community-wide bid to restore public confidence, each intelligence service now places job advertisements in the national press, offers career presentations at academic recruitment fairs, and maintains a website delineating objectives and staffing. Generally speaking, MI5 is more open than its sister service, SIS. In a recent step towards greater

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transparency, on 6 January 2009 Jonathan Evans became the first serving director general in MI5’s 100-year history to meet the press.

New Openings

Historiography has benefited immeasurably from the two-decade waning of intelligence taboos. Declassification of documentary evidence, especially older material, has gone hand in hand with the more general opening up of intelligence agencies. The process began with the Waldegrave Initiative on Open Government in 1993, which saw the first release of historical records generated by the secret services and afforded independent historians the opportunity to assist in the formulation of retention and release policies.⁴⁸

By the end of the second millennium, hundreds of files relating to SOE, MI5, and Ultra had been transferred to TNA, though few related to the period beyond 1945. Since then, a tsunami of declassified material has occurred. To date, MI5 has declassified approximately 4,000 “pieces” of historically significant information (in official usage, a piece may represent a whole file or a particular portion of it), including wartime material on German spies and double agents, and early

Cold War files on Soviet intelligence operations.⁴⁹ SIS, despite retaining its own archive, has released a number of documents held in the files of other departments and approved the declassification of all surviving SOE records in its custody. Now, rather than retain entire documents, departments producing classified material increasingly extract or “white-out” sensitive passages (a redaction technique CIA has used since the 1970s—though it blacks out passages).

The opening of new repositories in Eastern Europe has also given historians a revealing glimpse at intelligence activities and the mindset on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Materials bearing on the work of the East German Ministry for State Security (Stasi) have revealed a web of foreign espionage in Britain during the Cold War. By referring to a vast array of German sources in his book *The Stasi Files*, Anthony Glees suggested that some 100 Britons operated—wittingly or not—as agents of influence, including prominent CND members and, most controversially, Lord Roper, former director of studies at Chatham House.⁵⁰

It should be said, of course, that former Eastern bloc read-

In Britain, where spin doctors have a particular resonance in this field, the sincerity of declassification efforts has been the subject of much debate.

ing rooms do present problems. Although the communist system was *akribisch*—that is, obsessive about documenting itself—officials often talked “newspeak rather than brass tacks even behind closed doors.” Files relating to agents and informants, moreover, are notoriously patchy.⁵¹ In a memorably bitter review, Paul Maddrell attacked *The Stasi Files* for inflating its subject matter and accused Gleebs of committing a cardinal sin for any historian, failing to authenticate the reliability of his evidence.⁵²

In Britain, where spin doctors have a particular resonance in this field, the sincerity of declassification efforts has been the subject of much debate. For British intelligence scholar Ken Robertson they have been tantamount to carefully coordinated publicity stunts by a government intent on “policing its past,” providing officials with the opportunity to rhapsodize about transparency while it exerts control over the pace and content of disclosure. Newly released files, it is said, only disclose what governments deem safe to put on public view.⁵³

Following Robertson’s example, Peter Gill argues that Whitehall has become increasingly skilled at what he calls “burying,” a strategy of bom-

barding the public with a mass of largely insignificant information.⁵⁴ The first tranche of SOE material, which included hefty batches of files on sabotage devices (e.g., incendiary cigarettes and exploding rats), and papers setting out plans to assassinate Adolf Hitler, was presented to the public as one of the biggest “windfalls” of the end of the Cold War. Such material is all well and good, auguring, as it did, a more open future. It would be well to bear in mind, however, that such programs of document release might also serve as the perfect matador’s cape—waved ostentatiously to draw the eye away from more critical areas.

Richard Aldrich is another scholar who has warned against taking the Waldegrave Initiative at face value. Before entering the public domain, he reminds us, official records are meticulously “preselected, cleaned and processed” by the Whitehall machine. With no external assurance that what is released is “necessarily an analogue of reality,” what is to stop the researcher from becoming an official historian, albeit once removed?⁵⁵ Documents written by actual spies require perhaps the most careful handling. As Bernard Porter writes, “all spies and secret agents are liars, trained in techniques of

deception and dissimulation, who are just as likely to fake the historical record as anything else.”⁵⁶

Some researchers therefore have turned to oral history—“growing their own records”—in order to corroborate the accuracy of their archival findings.⁵⁷ This, too, of course, has inherent flaws—the inevitable diminished memory, especially when a subject worked in secrecy. Such testimony is often polluted by what has been absorbed from subsequent experience and discourse, or, in the case of the once powerful, corrupted by a self-conscious desire to entomb a good reputation. As Philip Davies convincingly argues, the most effective intelligence scholar should not use witness testimony to the exclusion of all other material but should “triangulate” research through a triad of archival, secondary, and oral sources.⁵⁸

Communities of Research

Although the scope of historical writing on intelligence today is so wide that it is difficult to pigeonhole scholars into research communities or subschools, Wesley Wark’s treatise *Espionage: Past, Present, Future?* notes that certain “projects” are presently being pursued and suggests a few categories.⁵⁹

Frameworks. The first might be called the “Research Proj-

ect,” the main task of which is to establish the historical framework of intelligence, rediscovering and interpreting its growth, performance, and relevance. Centered on the “episodic treatment of intelligence in peace and war” during the period from the creation of the Secret Service Bureau in 1909 to the end of the Cold War,⁶⁰ the “Research Project” involves a prolonged immersion in archival sources and favors the case study methodology. Many texts are understandably prone to narrative and description. Without such work, however, intelligence history would remain conjectural, even conspiratorial and misconceived, and laden with epistemic blind spots.

Theory. A second project works to answer the question, “What is intelligence?” The effort to define intelligence rubs shoulders with political science, gives rise to what is often referred to as “intelligence theory,”⁶¹ and is, as Michael Warner explains, far more complicated than painting a caricature of “some shadowy figure...skulking in a dark alley.” Moreover, how we define intelligence has significant implications for practitioners and scholars alike, shaping the work and remit of oversight committees, as well as influencing declassification policies by elucidating what are and are not activities that governments are required to keep secret.⁶²

Until recently—in the much-quoted words of Walter Laqueur—“all attempts to develop ambitious theories of intelligence have failed.”

Until recently—in the much-quoted words of Walter Laqueur—“all attempts to develop ambitious theories of intelligence have failed.”⁶³ Officialdom stuck to a very rigid definition of intelligence as “information about things foreign”—capabilities, intentions, or activities. In academic writing, meanwhile, the term was defined de novo by each scholar who discussed it. Today we tend to think about intelligence in terms of a three-part schema.⁶⁴ The first, usually labelled “the intelligence cycle,” is a series of steps that begins with a request for information, which is then collected, analyzed, and disseminated to the client. Secondly, it is seen as a “product,” used by decisionmakers at several levels. Thirdly, it is seen as an “institution,” encompassing the roles of related pursuits such as covert action, deception, and clandestine diplomacy.

Warner’s definition—“Intelligence is secret, state activity to understand or influence foreign entities”—is as apt as it is succinct.⁶⁵ This said, in the 21st century it is arguably getting harder to build a properly encompassing taxonomy of intelligence. The increased production and consumption of surreptitiously acquired information by private groups, such as water suppliers, electricity companies, and airlines chal-

lenges the assertion that intelligence is organized by the state for the state.⁶⁶

The recent emphasis on open source intelligence (OSINT) has further muddied the water, “blurr[ing] distinctions between intelligence and information and the barrier between secret and non-secret.”⁶⁷ Although OSINT under one name or another has been around for centuries, with the rise of the Internet and global communications, the ability to search material at the click of a button has given it much greater prominence and added new components, for example, the blogosphere and social media.

The Interdisciplinary. A commitment to interdisciplinary synergies has become one of the hallmarks of intelligence historiography. The involvement of historians and political scientists, as well as partners in English, sociology, and law has made it a distinctive research cluster. Certain intelligence scholars would consider themselves as “hybrid” or “hyphenated” historians, taking their research and perspectives beyond the academy. Although those who write for nonacademic audiences are still sometimes disparaged, for many in the community, the development of a synthetic literature that connects intelligence his-

The need to relate historical analysis to contemporary problems has led to the establishment of dedicated research centers.

tory and public policy is essential.⁶⁸

History, proponents claim, can be quarried for lessons and can inform current and future practitioners. The most vocal spokesman for the “Public Policy Project” has been Christopher Andrew. From salutary warnings about the dangers of failing to heed the lessons of history, Andrew has moved to the assertion that today’s political culture suffers from “Historical Attention Span Deficit Disorder,” a widespread belief that the past is “irrelevant to present and future policy and intelligence analysis.”⁶⁹ For example, had decisionmakers prior to the Iraq War been



“Hacker in chief,” Christopher Andrew. Image courtesy C. Andrew.

familiar with failed British attempts to estimate Soviet nuclear capability during the Cold War, they would have realized that approximating WMD stocks is fraught with difficulty and potential intellectual blinking.

The need to relate historical analysis to contemporary problems has led to the establishment of dedicated research centers, such as the Brunel Centre for Intelligence and Security Studies (BCISS) and the Buckingham University Centre for Security and Intelligence Studies (BUCSIS), that foster links with practitioners and offer degree program? in both historical and policy-oriented contexts.⁷⁰ Designed as “career-relevant” degrees, MA programs are invariably filled by those in quest of, or engaged in, security-related jobs. Academics at Brunel and Buckingham double as consultants, providing custom-made academic packages to both professional and corporate clients.

It is pleasing to note that the United States has similar centers to prepare students for careers in intelligence and provide educational tools to the intelligence community. A cluster exists, not surprisingly, among the several universities in the Washington, DC area. Exemplary outside the capital

is the Center for Intelligence and Security Studies at the University of Mississippi.

The “Official History.” The most common way to connect history with policy is, of course, to write full-scale histories, which analyze all stages of the intelligence cycle and seek to identify trends and themes from past to present. With their access to resources of state, including former agents and personnel, the best people to undertake such a task may be official historians: “Just as intelligence chiefs have to be able to tell policymakers what they do not want to know, so official historians have to be free, on occasion, to tell intelligence agencies uncomfortable truths.”⁷¹

In 2009, MI5 marked its centenary with the publication of an authorized history, written by Christopher Andrew. In 2010, Keith Jeffrey’s officially sanctioned history of SIS hit bookshops. It covered the history of the service from its beginnings in 1909 to the early Cold War. Yet not everyone has warmed to such works. As Len Scott and Peter Jackson explain, “For some academics the Ivory Tower should remain a sanctuary and provide a panorama on the world outside.”⁷² Is it not profoundly unfair, critics ask, that Professors Andrew and Jeffrey have been able to feast their eyes on materials denied to the remainder of their

profession? For Anthony Glees, the risk of whitewashing is all too great: "I don't think governments should write their own history. Academics should not become ambassadors or politicians, or work for the secret service."⁷³

Christopher Andrew, having twice coauthored officially sponsored histories of the KGB (with the aid of Soviet defectors, Oleg Gordievsky and Vasili Mitrokhin), has been labelled by cynical voices as a "court historian." This is too strong. Andrew and Jeffrey, who throughout their careers have railed against the official position that there could be no middle ground between total secrecy and total disclosure, have to preserve their academic standing at all costs. Sanitizing the historical record now, knowing that documents in question will in due course enter the public domain, would be making whips for their own flogging.

The Countervailing View. A small group of intelligence historians in the UK is engaged in dissecting the seamier side of espionage. The so-called "Civil Liberties Project" (also known as the "para-political" school) conjoins two scholarly agendas.⁷⁴ The first is a program for researching intelligence history by way of nonofficial sources, including obituaries, editorials, satirical magazines (such as *Private*

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Eye), and other cultural miscellanea.

The second is a strategy for writing intelligence history from the "bottom up," moving beyond the intensively cultivated field of high politics to explore the private experience of spies and their most intimate details, such as sexuality, social class, and political orientation. Among the most vociferous proponents of the "Civil Liberties Project" are Robin Ramsay and Stephen Dorril. Their investigations deftly survey the heartless aspects of the secret state, upending established orthodoxy by rendering Western and Eastern European intelligence services as equally contemptuous and equally corrupt.

MI6: Fifty Years of Special Operations was in itself an exposition of the basic tenets of "para-political" approaches. In the preface, Dorril writes: "In order to unravel the activities of SIS, one has to dig deep and sift carefully, in the manner of an archaeologist, but also acculturate, like some intrepid anthropologist, to a strange and secretive society whose intricate social and professional networks are familiar to their members but quite baffling to the outsider."⁷⁵ What emerges from Dorril's 900-page tome is that SIS, determined to keep

Britain at the top table in an age of postimperial decline, became a law unto itself, implicated in the surveillance and infiltration of dissident groups; the secret funding of propaganda and smearing opponents; and the formulation of "disruptive action," including assassination plots, against such leaders as Mohammed Mossadeq, Slobodan Milosevic, and Muammar Qaddafi.

Few mainstream authors support the "para-political" belief that what the intelligence services do is nefarious and disproportionate to the threat posed by the nation's enemies. Peter Hennessy, in his excellent study of the Cold War secret state and contingency planning in the event of Soviet attack, makes an impressive case for the view that the UK intelligence community, far from being a rogue elephant, comprised a noble band of skillful patriots, and was instrumental in defending the realm and keeping Britain out of nuclear war.⁷⁶ In time, he proposes, as new evidence is marshalled on communist subversion and the dirty work of the KGB, the dominant historiographical assumption will probably be that British counterintelligence was grossly inadequate.

British historiography of intelligence—having grown out of traditional British political history, which frankly precludes an interest in the non-Western world—has neglected the role of intelligence services in imperial contexts.

New Directions

It should be clear, by now, that this is an exciting time for UK students of intelligence, a subject no longer obscured by secrecy or bedecked with flights of the imagination. All the omens point to a healthy future. Fourteen British universities presently offer undergraduate or postgraduate courses explicitly on intelligence and security; at least a further dozen offer modules on terrorism and political violence.⁷⁷ As the Cold War continues to recede into history, more archival openings are anticipated. Indeed, as Donald Cameron Watt once pointed out, historians of intelligence will always be better off than scholars working on the Greco-Roman period or the Middle Ages.⁷⁸

For the foreseeable future, intelligence will remain a cornerstone of democratic government, tasked to counter the enduring threat from al-Qa'ida and associated networks, but also used increasingly in peacekeeping, crisis management and contingency planning. For those researching contemporary matters, therefore, it is a case of "having to run to keep up."⁷⁹

But can the same necessarily be said for intelligence histori-

ans? Leaving aside fears about whitewashing and sycophancy, the recently published official histories of MI5 and SIS are truly exhaustive in their coverage; that is the official historian's privilege. When the official history of the JIC is released, little of the general outline will be left unsaid. With this, the original *raison d'être* of intelligence history—namely, to rescue from oblivion the gaps in knowledge—will appear tired and slow. As is the way of things, intelligence historians will have become settlers rather than pioneers, required to think reflexively about the nature of their enterprise. Arguably, less time will be spent *doing* intelligence history, and more *reflecting* on how it is done and where it needs to go.

A handful of areas seem deserving of more attention, however. So far, British historiography of intelligence—having grown out of traditional British political history, which frankly precludes an interest in the non-Western world—has neglected the role of intelligence services in imperial contexts, especially during the period of decolonization. Contrary to popular belief, the geographical scope of MI5's work has never been restricted to the metropole. The protection of

British interests worldwide (diplomatic properties and staff; businesses and investments; and citizens living abroad) has long fallen within the remit of its functions. Both Philip Murphy and Calder Walton have made initial forays into this topic, demonstrating how the intelligence services attempted to gather information about indigenous groups, to police political opponents, and to extinguish "colonial fires," albeit with diminishing success in the 1950s.⁸⁰

Although spy fiction is a subject well traversed in literary and film studies (exploring the formulaic nature of the genre, plot conventions, and the like), there has been conspicuously little attention by historians to the genre, specifically the important question of how its products relate to and reflect the real world of intelligence.⁸¹

The debunking of intrigue narratives has become a compulsory practice. However, as Wark implored over 10 years ago, the relationship between social reality and popular cultural construction should be addressed.⁸² Rightly or wrongly, spy fiction has to a large extent shaped public perceptions of intelligence. Many retired SIS officers, including John le Carré, often admit to joining British intelligence as young men partly because they had been brought up on a fictional diet of swashbuckling yarns.

According to KGB defector Oleg Gordievsky, the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party routinely watched James Bond films in the vain hope that its scientists could replicate “Q Branch” technology.⁸³ In the mid-1960s, mindful of a “spy fiction gap,” the KGB attempted to win the thriller war by commissioning Bulgarian author Andrei Gulyashki to write a series of spy novels in which the “cerebral powers” and “analytical mind” of a self-styled major named Zakhov were pitted against James Bond’s “ruthless, intuitive violence.”⁸⁴ Needless to say, Bond is ultimately slain at the hand of his superior, morally clean Soviet adversary.

Despite the recent appearance of *GCHQ: The Uncensored History of Britain’s Most Secret Intelligence Agency*, by Richard Aldrich, what one might call the “SIGINT Project” has scarcely begun.⁸⁵ In part, this is because the fast-paced world of covert action has been instantly more arresting to historians, and to their publishers, than has been the mundane setting of moth-eaten desk men combing transcripts of telephone conversations and burrowing in mountains of diplomatic correspondence.

It is also the case that much of the pertinent material has not yet been released. For many in the profession, therefore, the

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focus on HUMINT has been more a matter of necessity than professional preference. Yet Christopher Andrew has been especially critical of intelligence historians for failing to take account of SIGINT’s contribution in the Cold War. Its continued absence, he argues, reflects widespread “cognitive dissonance” within the discipline—that is, reluctance among scholars to embrace a subject that would fundamentally challenge historiographical orthodoxy, not to mention their own career-hardened patterns of thought.⁸⁶

The current crop of intelligence historians, suggests Andrew, are not the first to display cognitive dissonance with respect to SIGINT. In 1945, Sir Edward Travis, operational head of Bletchley Park and, later, director of GCHQ, was certain that scholars would soon discover the Ultra secret: “The comparing of the German and British documents is bound to arouse suspicion in [their] minds that we succeeded in reading the enemy ciphers.”⁸⁷ The clues, it was assumed, were too obvious for historians to miss.

It was widely known that British cryptographers, under the direction of intelligence offi-

cer Reginald “Blinker” Hall, had cracked German codes during the Great War; indeed, Room 40’s successful interception of the Zimmermann telegram, which accelerated the United States’ entry into the war, had achieved extensive notoriety and fanfare in the press.⁸⁸ Held from November 1945 to July 1946, the Congressional Inquiry into Pearl Harbor had publicly discussed the accomplishments of “Magic,” the cryptonym for American efforts to break Japanese military and diplomatic communications during World War Two.

Despite allowing for the enormous benefit of hindsight, the fact that no historian, for over a quarter of century, considered the possibility that the British had enjoyed similar success against Hitler’s ciphers is remarkable. Just as baffling, when intelligence officer turned author Donald McLachlan disclosed Bletchley Park’s secret codename—“Station X”—in his 1968 publication, *Room 39: Naval Intelligence in Action 1939–45*, it took another 6 years before historians finally connected the dots and started to consider with confidence the contribution of British cryptography to the Allied war effort.⁸⁹

It is very important, however, that we also cast our net beyond the relationship between British intelligence and its partner agencies in Washington.

One of the biggest challenges facing intelligence historians is to resist the urge to study the British intelligence community in geographic isolation. For its sins, much of the existing literature is parochial and Panglossian; that is, accepting of the unique and incomparable make-up of British institutions, and reluctant to analyze thematic issues in a broader transnational context.⁹⁰

Embedding the history of the British intelligence services in a comparative history of the 20th century intelligence revolution should reveal similarities and differences between particular national systems and thereby allow us to draw con-

clusions about general trends and dynamics. *The Hidden Hand: Britain, America and Cold War Secret Intelligence*, by Richard Aldrich, is an exemplar of comparative history, seamlessly shifting between two intelligence cultures and their institutions. By placing intelligence in a hemispheric perspective, Aldrich reveals not only the cohesion and unities of the Anglo-American “Special Relationship,” but also the moments of “rancour and suspicion” that have threatened to derail its continuance. Nuanced, archivally rich, and theoretically informed—an unusual trifecta—*Intelligence Cooperation and the War on Terror*; by Adam Svendsen, is

another recent example of historical writing that successfully manages to employ a comparative methodology.⁹¹

It is very important, however, that we also cast our net beyond the relationship between British intelligence and its partner agencies in Washington. During the Cold War, in a bid to monitor the Soviet Union and its satellites, the UK intelligence community often liaised with a range of non-Anglo-Saxon allies, including the West German Federal Intelligence Service (BND) and the French General Directorate for External Security (DGSE). The task of unpacking these relationships still awaits its historian.



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81. A notable exception here is a special issue of the journal *Studies in Intelligence*. See "Intelligence in Contemporary Media: Views of Intelligence Officers," *Studies in Intelligence: Special Review Supplement* (Summer 2009).

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83. See J. Black, "The Geopolitics of James Bond," *Intelligence and National Security* 19, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 290–303.

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87. United Kingdom. E. Travis, "Special Order," 7 May 1945, TNA, HW 3/29.

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90. This argument is often made in relation to British political history. See S. Pedersen, "What is Political History Now?" in *What is History Now?* ed. D. Cannadine, (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2002), 36–57.

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