

# Action This Day

## *Intelligence in Recent Public Literature*

Edited by Michael Smith and Ralph Erskine. London, UK: Bantam Press, 2001. 543 pages.

## **Reviewed by Mark E. Stout**

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The assertive title boldly lettered on the gunmetal gray book spine makes this volume look like another tiresome autobiography by a former SAS trooper. However, this gem in fact is an edited volume of essays about Bletchley Park and its SIGINT efforts during World War II. (The title was Churchill's response to a 1941 memorandum from four Bletchley codebreakers asking for more resources.) The collection offers a pleasing combination of scholarship and memoirs, with eight Bletchley veterans contributing to the proceedings along with a variety of historians, including Prof. Christopher Andrew who wrote the first and last chapters putting Bletchley in pre- and post-War context.

Among the best chapters is editor Ralph Erskine's "Enigma's Security: What Germans Really Knew." This hair-raising essay is implicitly a powerful argument for alternative analysis, interagency intelligence sharing, and the breaking down of compartmentation. Erskine reports, for example, that in March 1943 the German Kriegsmarine's SIGINT service decrypted an Allied "U-Boat Estimate" that noted the location of a group of U-boats, allegedly on the basis of direction finding. The Kriegsmarine knew, however, that those U-boats could not possibly have been located by means of direction finding because they had not emitted signals. Five months later, the Abwehr passed along a report from a source in Switzerland that "a special office [in England] has dealt exclusively with solving German codes. It has succeeded for some months in reading all orders sent by the Kriegsmarine to U-boat commanders." More astounding still, in March 1944 a German technical commission firmly established that before the war the Polish

technical commission firmly established that before the war the Polish Cipher Center had broken Enigma, the German code system. However, the commission's report never got to the Kriegsmarine's Marine Communications Service, which was doing a review of naval Enigma's security. It probably would not have mattered, however--the service was chartered "to explain for what reason reading of our signals . . . could not have taken place."

John Cripps, a graduate student working on a doctoral dissertation on "British Signals Intelligence and the War in Yugoslavia, 1941-1944," provided a chapter that adds to the open literature on another case in which intelligence demonstrably contributed to policymaking. He describes how Bletchley's work was central to Churchill's ideologically surprising decision to support Tito and his Partisans instead of Mihailovic's Chetniks. Bletchley was, to varying degrees, reading the communications of everyone involved: the Germans, Italians, Partisans, and Chetniks, even the Slovene Communist Party and the COMINTERN that provided guidance to Tito. Cripps demonstrates how this mass of SIGINT proved to Churchill that Tito was harassing the Axis occupiers to greater effect than Mihailovic. Cripps makes it clear that the famous report from the legendary Fitzroy McLean, the Prime Minister's liaison officer to Tito, was not the deciding factor, despite Churchill's efforts to make it appear that way. It is evident that by the time McLean's report arrived, Churchill's mind was already made up. Similarly, there is no need to attribute the decision, as some have done, to the machinations of a Soviet NKVD agent of influence serving in the British Special Operations Executive office in Cairo.

"Colossus and the Dawning of the Computer Age," by computer historian Prof. Jack Copeland, has a different flavor than the rest of the book, but is a valuable addition. Copeland notes that history books still sometimes erroneously state that the first electronic digital computer was the American ENIAC, completed in 1945. Bletchley's "Colossus" was completed in December 1943 and put to work on the German teleprinter cipher, which the British called "Tunny." ENIAC got the credit, however, because it was not a secret whereas Colossus was. It was not until 1975 that a picture of Colossus was declassified, and it was 1983 before a description of how it functioned became available, and 1996 before the United States--not the UK--declassified a description of the use to which it had been put. No wonder ENIAC made all the textbooks.

The chapters from Bletchley participants are less scholarly, but not to be neglected. Mavis Batey's "Breaking Italian Naval Enigma," for example, is a

lively account of a rather obscure subject. Similarly, James Thirsk recalls his service as a "log-reader," what we would today call a traffic analyst. He ends his engaging chapter by recounting how, shortly after the German surrender, the log-readers were told to start working on French and Soviet traffic. When a group of them protested that they could not spy on Allies, their commanding officer responded: "in that case you are redundant."

In conclusion, it should be noted that the proceeds from the sale of *Action This Day* go to the Bletchley Park Trust, an organization devoted to Bletchley's preservation.

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