

Intelligence in Public Media

The Secret World: A History of Intelligence

Christopher Andrew (Yale University Press, 2018), 960 pp., illustrations, bibliography, notes, index.

Reviewed by Leslie C.

Christopher Andrew is the dean of intelligence historians, and in *The Secret World: A History of Intelligence*, he has undertaken the ambitious task of producing a global history of clandestine operations. His purpose is prescriptive, as he professes that long-term perspective is required to deal with present intelligence challenges. Synthesis of this magnitude is a complicated business. Beyond mastery of myriad sources, successful execution requires effective framing of issues so that a meaningful narrative structure emerges; it highlights the centrality of choice, what to include—and, as important—what to omit; and it demands of the author no small degree of craftsmanship in writing, lest the work descend into pedantry.

The book features carefully intertwined themes. One traces antecedents of present institutions and practices. To offer one example: the Russian SVR—at least culturally—predates the KGB, its Soviet predecessors, and even the Tsarist Okhrana, back to Ivan “the Terrible” and the Oprichniki, whose chief, Maliuta Skuratov, Andrew describes as, “against strong competition, probably the most loathsome figure in the entire history of Russian intelligence.” (142) Similarly, the KGB’s countersubversion campaign would have been familiar to the Spanish Inquisition, whose *autos da fe* Soviet show trials consciously aped.

What we would recognize as modern intelligence bureaucracies have waxed and waned over time. No such apparatus existed in the ancient world. The Greeks placed far greater emphasis on seers, oracles, and the intervention of the gods, than on HUMINT. The Romans attached similar importance to divination, and commanders who acted in contempt of omens were believed responsible for their own misfortune. After Julius Caesar, emperors employed informers to warn of plots. The practice, however necessary, was unsuccessful: three-quarters of them suffered assassination or overthrow.

Another theme is the persistence of amateurism. The 12 operatives Moses sent into Canaan circa 1300 B.C.

were chosen for their social standing, not because they had any skill, and 10 of them gave distorted reports. In 19th century Europe, intelligence, counterespionage, and countersubversion were secondary duties for police forces. Scotland Yard’s Special Branch, for example, was founded to counter Fenian terrorism in London. From an Edwardian England paranoid about the rising German threat, Robert Baden-Powell suggested, “The best spies are unpaid men who are doing it for the love of the thing” (450). And when CIA was in its infancy, Sherman Kent feared the profession lacked a serious literature.

Andrew salts the narrative with turning points in global history that influenced the craft of intelligence in sometimes surprising ways. These include:

- The dissemination of the printing press, which enabled, for the first time, open source collection.
- The golden age of exploration was instrumental in the rise of official secrecy. Renaissance Venice was obsessed with using official secrecy to protect lucrative trade routes; Venetian ambassadors became models in the use of embassies as platforms for running agent networks; and the Venetian Council of Ten recruited foreign merchants to report on commercial developments and established the first European code-breaking agency.
- The emergence of the nation state and modern diplomacy were a boon to the intelligence business. The earliest ambassadors were expected to collect foreign intelligence as well as represent their sovereigns, though their requirements were unlike ours: Spanish agents at the court of Louis XIII were required to verify that the teenaged monarch had consummated his marriage to his equally young queen, Anne of Austria. Similarly, Sir Francis Walsingham was both secretary of state and intelligence chief to Elizabeth I. There was minimal distinction between these roles until the 20th century, when intelligence bureaucracies developed and SIGINT became a discipline.

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- The rapid spread of the telegraph and the wireless, in turn, enabled SIGINT. Before, it consisted of what the French called *cabinets noir* for intercepting and decrypting private or diplomatic correspondence. Intelligence from such operations put Mary Queen of Scots and Charles I on the execution block. Unsurprisingly, SIGINT enjoys prominence here due both to its implementation by recordkeeping bureaucracies, and the significance—if not the fame—of its impact across centuries, not least during the Second World War. Indeed, Andrew observes that intelligence studies as a discipline had its origins in the declassification of ULTRA and Double Cross in the 1970s.

Though this is a global history, Europe is the predominant presence, due to the lack of available documentation on other geopolitical entities. Andrew acknowledges Asian antecedents—*Art of War* and the Indian *Arthashastra*—asserting the latter was the first book anywhere to call for the establishment of a professional intelligence service and the first to envision a fully organized surveillance state. (61) Mao Zedong studied Sun Tzu more closely than did any previous emperor, even as Andrew argues that the book promises more than it delivers; successive dynasties neglected intelligence just as they ignored the outside world. Like the Romans, most Chinese rulers were more concerned with assassination and covert action against internal rivals.

Andrew does relatively little with intelligence analysis in its own right, though he addresses notable analytical failures that tended to be failures of imagination, as when he shows that, before Japan peaked in 1942, most Western analysts could not conceive of “Orientals” being so capable; or when he observes that, “Western intelligence agencies at the end of the Cold War suffered, though they did not realize it, from a serious lack of theologians,” (701) leading directly to the events of 1979 and 2001. Intelligence professionals steeped in Curveball, the “surprise” Soviet collapse, and the like, will be interested

to learn that Lord Nelson’s failure to detect Napoleon’s Egypt-bound invasion fleet triggered the first documented official query into an intelligence failure, despite his subsequent annihilation of that fleet at Aboukir Bay.

Across the scope of this chronicle, Andrew identifies leaders he regards as effective intelligence practitioners and consumers, from Hannibal to Frederick the Great, from Walsingham to Washington. He likewise criticizes those who ignored intelligence, and does not spare the biographers of the great and the good for overlooking the pivotal role it has played in politics and international affairs. Andrew is a Cambridge don, so we should not be surprised at a touch of Anglophilia. Walsingham—who emerges the hero—was the first to integrate espionage, counter-espionage, code-breaking, and countersubversion into a cohesive system to protect his sovereign from unprecedented internal and external threats. His practices, including recruiting agents among hated ideological opponents (161), doubling the financiers of plots against their masters, penetrating Jesuit seminaries in Europe training agents to penetrate England, and feeding disinformation through known foreign agents, are utterly modern. Other chapters on British topics are among the best written. And while Andrew praises George Washington for confounding his foes during the Revolution, one senses bemusement in his account of how easily the British manipulated a naïve US government during World War One.

American readers are advised to heed Andrew’s admonition about the long view. In 760 pages of text, only the penultimate chapter directly addresses the Cold War and CIA, with the last reserved for the age of sacred terror. This is, however, beside the point. As synthesis, *The Secret World* is an unqualified success. The text is rich with fact and anecdote alike, engagingly written, and marbled with shrewd observation and judgment that intelligence professionals might consider—or debate—with equal benefit.



The reviewer: Leslie C. is a career CIA Directorate of Operations officer who has an interest in intelligence history.