



Guide to the Study of Intelligence

Intelligence Between The World Wars, 1919-1939

“A World Made Safe For Deaths of Democracy”

— Referring to this period, in the final chapter title in Richard W. Rowan's 1937 book, *The Story of Secret Service* (p. 664)

by Douglas L. Wheeler, PhD

Between the end of World War I and the onset of World War II, many intelligence services grew in size, budget and function, and their roles in military, diplomatic and political affairs assumed increasingly greater importance.¹ This period was marked by numerous small, short armed conflicts, and witnessed revolutionary innovations in intelligence-related technologies.

Out of the lingering Great Depression and international conflicts emerged the principal totalitarian states of the 20th Century — Nazi Germany, Stalinist Soviet Union, and militarist Japan. Each created a “police state,” a term describing the use of intelligence and police services for the repression of domestic opposition including exiled opponents abroad. The totalitarian intelligence services also produced propaganda boasting of military prowess to intimidate weaker states. Their intelligence services’ operations abroad were often for economic penetration. Especially good at this were Japan and the Soviet Union. A favored method was saturation by infiltrating both “legal” (with diplomatic cover) and “illegal” spies. The three Soviet secret services (OGPU, GRU and Comintern) were active worldwide. The Soviets favored targeting Western industrial zones and heavily

1. The exception was during the early and mid-1920s when intelligence services reduced budgets and personnel numbers. The Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI), for example, at the end of World War I had about 300 personnel but by early 1924 their personnel strength had been reduced to 40.

trafficked ports as well as principal economic centers from Berlin to Stockholm to Paris to London to New York and beyond. Despite the propaganda and the post-1934 dispatch of German “tourists” to several continents, the Third Reich’s secret services were less effective in this work than their Japanese and Soviet counterparts.

Popular Perceptions

From popular culture of the time emerged some long lasting images of spies. Out of World War I came the Mata Hari story, which purported to typify the seductive role of women in spying. Today’s use of “sexpionage” perpetuates that myth. By the 1930s, the image of the real life spy conducting surveillance out-of-doors in a trench coat, a garb first designed by a London clothier for British officers to wear over their uniforms in trench warfare, became an almost universal depiction of the spy. The term “Fifth Column,” originated in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) during the siege of Madrid. It meant that an organized underground of agents behind the battlefield would rise up and undermine the defense against external attack.

The 1920s: International Intrigue and Small Wars

The terms of the June 1919 Versailles peace treaty shaped requirements for the intelligence services of Britain and France, which sought to determine if Germany was disarming as required. Germany’s extensive rearmament program, which from 1922 to 1933 was carried out in secret in conspiracy with the Soviet Union, was a major collection target for Western governments, investigative newspapers, and German and other European organizations, which viewed German rearmament as a threat to peace. One sensational scandal in 1935 resulted from a private exposé of the *sub rosa* German rearmament program by Berthold Jacob Solomon, a German Jew, investigative journalist and Nazi oppositionist, who was kidnapped in Switzerland by the Gestapo and incarcerated in a German prison. The international outrage and Swiss diplomatic pressure forced the Nazi regime to release him, and he left Germany for exile.

European newspapers reported on numerous spy incidents during this period. One of the more curious

CONFLICTS IN THE INTER-WAR PERIOD (1919-1939)

EUROPE	
1917-1921	Ukrainian War of Independence
1918-1921	Russian Civil War (Bolsheviks)
1918-1920	Latvian War of Independence
1918-1920	Hungarian – Romanian War
1919-1921	Anglo-Irish War
1919	Estonian War of Independence
1919-1920	Lithuanian War of Independence
1919	Czechoslovak-Polish War
1920	Russo-Polish War
1920	Vlora War (Italy-Albania)
1920	Polish-Lithuanian War
1934	Austrian Civil Strife
1936-1939	Spanish Civil War
1939	Slovak-Hungarian War
MIDDLE EAST	
1919-1922	Turkish War of Independence
1919-1922	Greco-Turkish War
1920-1921	Franco-Turkish War (Cilicia)
1920	Iraqi Revolt/War
1926-1928	French suppression of Syrian Revolt
1936-1939	British Palestine sectarian strife
AFRICA	
1920-1927	Franco-Spanish pacification of Morocco
1922	South African pacification of SW Africa
1925-1935	Italian aggression in Libya
1930	Gugsa Welle's rebellion, Ethiopia
1935-1936	Italo-Ethiopian War
ASIA	
1919	3 rd Anglo-Afghan War (NW frontier)
1920s	British pacification of Burma, India
1927-1937	Chinese Civil War
1931	Japanese invasion of Manchuria
1932	Japanese attack on Shanghai
1937-1945	Sino-Japanese War
1939	Russo-Japanese Border War (Outer Mongolia)
LATIN AMERICA	
1920-1935	US interventions – Nicaragua, Haiti, Dominican Republic, and Honduras
1927-1929	Mexican Cristero War
1932-1935	Chaco War (Bolivia – Paraguay)

cases involved Polish Major Jerzy Sosnowski, who in 1926 was sent to Berlin to uncover the plans and intentions of the post-war Weimar Republic. With a well-funded cover as a wealthy, aristocratic Polish war hero, playboy, racehorse owner and businessman, Sosnowski built a spy ring, which penetrated Germany's War Ministry. He was arrested in Berlin in 1934 and put on trial as a spy. Several of the aristocratic German women spies he had recruited, who were also his lovers, were also put on trial. Unlike Sosnowski, who was released and returned to Poland as part of a German-Polish spy exchange, the women were executed by beheading. Upon his return to Poland, Sosnowski was arrested and accused of having been "turned" by Germany and was given a fifteen-year prison sentence. The twists and turns of the Sosnowski case illustrate the extent to which deception had become a common practice in the European espionage wars.

The end of World War I and the peace settlements did not bring an end to conflict in Europe or elsewhere. Numerous conflicts ensued —wars of independence, nationalist resistance to European colonialism, frontier readjustments of the new Eastern European states created in the aftermath of the peace treaties, brutal civil wars in Russia and Spain, and territorial aggression by Japan and Italy in Asia and Africa. Consequently, the intelligence services of the European states were busy.

For more than half of the interwar period, British and French intelligence services focused on the emerging Soviet Union, which despite its efforts to foster Communist revolutions either by invading a neighbor (Poland, 1920) or by fomenting internal uprisings of Communist workers, sailors and soldiers (Germany, Hungary, and Austria), remained the only country which practiced Communism. After the Russian civil war ended in 1920-21 with the Bolshevik victory, a secret war proceeded, which pitted the British and French secret services against the expanding services of the Soviet Union. From the Bolshevik's initial secret police, the CHEKA, grew a larger service with various acronyms such as OGPU and NKVD. Even though OGPU, for example, dominated the intelligence field and was much larger and better funded, it was not the sole secret service: there was also Soviet military intelligence, the GRU, as well as departments of the Communist International (Comintern), which employed agents at home and abroad.² The Soviet Union remained diplomatically

2. For a history of Soviet and Russian secret services see Robert

isolated throughout much of the 1920s. It was not recognized diplomatically until the late 1920s (and not until 1933 by the United States) and did not join the League of Nations until 1934. Its foreign and defense policies functioned with the presumption that the main Western capitalist states, which had worked to defeat the Bolsheviks, remained hostile.

Soviet intelligence services sought to discover the military plans and intentions of adversaries such as Britain, France, Germany, and the United States, as well as Japan to which it had lost the 1904 Russo-Japanese War and continued to have territorial disputes in the Far East. In addition Soviet spies sought to obtain Western industrial and economic secrets in order to industrialize and compete with Western powers and strengthen the Soviet armed forces.

The Soviets employed different types of spies: “legals,” who used diplomatic cover at Soviet consulates and embassies and “illegals,” who used all manner of cover, including Soviet press and trade associations established in foreign capitals, as well as a variety of philosophically sympathetic agents who infiltrated workers’ unions, defense industries, and merchant marine crews. The targeting of workers and merchant seamen in major ports in Germany, the Low Countries and Scandinavia had the dual purpose of encouraging the overthrow of capitalism through paralyzing strikes and sabotage in the event of war with the Soviet Union.

Stalin used the long arm of Soviet intelligence to neutralize and murder exiled White Russians (the side which lost the Russian Civil War) and other enemies of the USSR wherever they resided abroad. Such tactics became public knowledge in Paris, a major sanctuary for thousands of White Russians, after 1919 when newspapers wrote stories about opponents or defectors being kidnapped from Paris streets or murdered in Switzerland. Most famously, Stalin’s principal rival, Leon Trotsky, was exiled in 1929 and assassinated in Mexico in 1940 by a Soviet agent recruited and trained by the NKVD during the Spanish Civil War (1936-39).

Two intelligence-related technologies, which were new in World War I, were further developed in the 1920s: signals intelligence, which grew out of the contest between cryptography and cryptanalysis with the use of two-way radios in addition to telegraphy and photography, used from airplanes to locate enemy forces and weaponry. Various intelligence services

throughout the world tried to exploit the protected communications of other states.³ Germany introduced a sophisticated cryptographic machine in the 1920s called “Enigma.” Polish and French code-breakers began to solve Enigma codes, which became a key advantage for Allied intelligence in World War II. In addition, spies and counter-intelligence agents employed concealable cameras with which to photograph purloined documents as well as industrial and military equipment. Furthermore, secret agents could now use portable equipment for recording voices without the subjects’ knowledge or for tapping telephone lines. These technologies became common tools in future international secret wars although even major powers could not always afford to equip their agents with such devices. As of September 1939, for example, Britain’s spies abroad still did not have two-way radios.

In the 1920s US intelligence focus was largely domestic. The anarchist and communist threats at home were the principal focus. Foreign intelligence collection was accomplished by a limited number of military and naval attaches posted in selected European and Asian countries. However, the US developed a significant signals intelligence capacity between the wars, despite setbacks and modest budgets. When World War I ended, Department of State codebreaking pioneer, Herbert O. Yardley, moved the Cipher Bureau, commonly known as the “Black Chamber,” to New York City and was financed by the Department of State and the Navy. In 1921, at the Washington Naval Arms Limitation Treaty conference, Yardley’s reading of the Japanese delegates’ secret diplomatic messages gave an advantage to American diplomats and enabled the United States to constrain Japan’s naval construction allowance in the final treaty. But in 1929, Secretary of State Stimson shut down Yardley’s New York signal intelligence unit with the now legendary comment, “Gentlemen do not read each other’s mail.” That same year, nevertheless, the U.S. Army Signal Intelligence Service was established and used Yardley’s unit’s old files. SIS was headed by codebreaking genius, William Friedman, who by 1939-1940 had achieved successes in reading high level diplomatic traffic from the new Japanese encoding “Red” machine. Meanwhile, in 1924, the U.S. Navy established a code-breaking unit in the Office of Naval Intelligence and began to work on Japanese diplomatic and naval traffic. In signals intelligence there was competition between the Army and Navy units.

W. Pringle, “Guide to Soviet and Russian Intelligence Services,” *Intelligencer*, Vol. 18, No. 2, Winter/Spring 2011, pp 51 – 54. Also on-line at www.afio.com/guide.

3. Some success against British naval signals was enjoyed by Germany between the wars.

The 1930s: The Not-So-Secret March to World War II

The totalitarian states built-up their secret intelligence services during the 1930s. Nazi Germany and Japan, in particular, initiated aggressive subversion on an unprecedented scale. Japanese intelligence played an active role in the territorial expansion into Manchuria (1931) and mainland China (1937), which marked the beginning of World War II in the Far East. Japan's services conducted subversion, deception and provocations in order to justify military intervention.

While Italy's takeover of Libya and conquest of Ethiopia (Abyssinia, 1935-36), were sideshows, the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), which began as a domestic conflict and caused at least 600,000 deaths and uncounted injuries and destruction, is viewed by many historians as the prelude and rehearsal for World War II in Europe. The Soviet Union supported the loyalists of the Spanish Republic, while the Fascist powers, Germany and Italy, supported General Franco's Nationalists. One legacy was the Soviet enlistment of Spanish spies, saboteurs, and assassins who, after the Republic fell, participated in the underground activities of Stalin, including infiltrating various countries and carrying out revenge missions abroad.

One of the most talented secret agents of all was Richard Sorge, a spy for Soviet military intelligence (GRU) who served in the Far East. Sorge was in China and then Japan with the cover of a newspaper reporter. His principal mission was to discover Japan's plans toward the Soviet Union, but by posing as a German and gaining access to the German embassy in Tokyo he also collected information on the Third Reich's strength, plans and intentions. Sorge's father was German, his mother Russian. His warning of Germany's intentions appear to have been ignored by Stalin but his intelligence on Japan's intention not to invade the Soviet Far East allowed Stalin to reposition significant forces from Siberia to face west.

In the 1930s the number of arrests of spies and spy trials rapidly grew in Europe. Typically, spy scares heightened concerns about security and trials stirred patriotic feelings. After 1930 in most states espionage during peacetime could result in capital punishment.

By the time World War II began with the German invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, most of the intelligence services were far larger and better equipped than they had been in 1914. However, assessments of potential enemies in the late 1930s were often wide of the mark. Assessments of many states were more accurate in terms of counting numbers of enemy

Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin were Spies

Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin each had minor intelligence service credentials. Though they were but tiny cogs in the intelligence wheel, they were participants: Hitler was a spy and propagandist for the German army in the early years of the ill-fated Weimar Republic; Mussolini late in World War I acted as a French secret agent, and Stalin before the 1917 Revolution had been an informant in Czarist Russia's secret police, the Okhrana.

forces and resources, but less accurate in plotting plans and intentions. Britain's intelligence system overestimated Nazi Germany's air force strength by almost 50%, yet came closer in estimating ground forces' numbers, if not their military prowess.

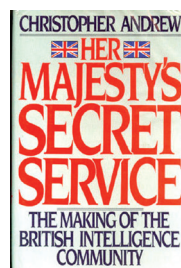
In the US the Justice Department's Federal Bureau of Investigation, beginning in 1936, was given presidential authority to devote greater resources against subversives, including foreign spies, especially Nazi and Japanese agents and, to a lesser extent, Soviet spies. With the outbreak of war in Europe in September 1939, the intelligence efforts of the Army, Navy and FBI began to grow rapidly.

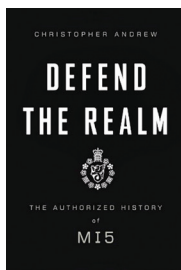
READINGS FOR INSTRUCTORS

No comprehensive intelligence history exists of the period between the world wars. Most coverage is by individual country or regime.

GREAT BRITAIN

For an introduction to British intelligence after 1918, there is Christopher Andrew's, *Her Majesty's Secret Service* (originally published in 1984, updated in paperback in 1998 by Viking), but it should be noted that in the late 1990s official histories of MI-6 and MI-5 were published and include materials that cover this era. See Keith Jeffery, *The Secret History of MI6, 1909-1949* (New York, Penguin, 2010),

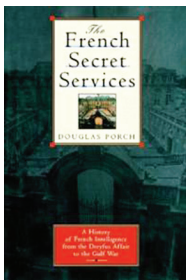
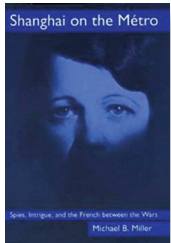




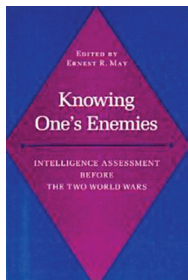
and Christopher Andrew, *Defend The Realm. The Authorized History of MI5* (New York, Knopf, 2009).

FRANCE

For spies, international crime and intrigue in interwar France, Michael Miller's *Shanghai on the Métro* (1994, Berkeley, University of California Press) utilizes police files and popular spy literature. For a larger perspective on France's intelligence history, Douglas Porch's *The French Secret Services* (1995, New York, Farrar, Straus, Giroux) remains indispensable. The classic anthology related to intelligence assessments in the 1920s and 1930s (as well as pre-1914) in Britain, Germany, Russia, France, Italy, Japan and the United States, is Ernest R. May (ed),

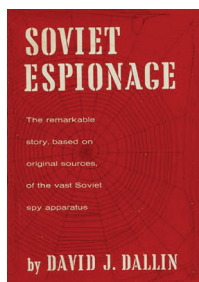
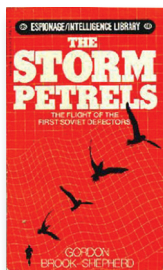
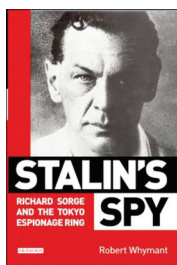


Knowing One's Enemies (1984, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press) based in large part on government archives.



USSR

Studies of Soviet intelligence to 1939 represent a field unto itself and includes biographies and autobiographies of spies, early Soviet defectors and underground agents. A good biography of master spy, Richard Sorge, is Robert Whyment, *Stalin's Spy* (1998, New York, St. Martin's Press). A classic anatomy of Soviet spying into the early Cold War years by a Russian-born historian is David Dallin's *Soviet Espionage* (1955, New Haven, CT, Yale University Press). Biographies of early Soviet defectors, several of whom were intelligence officers, are in Gordon Brook-Shepherd, *The Storm Petrels* (1978, Ballantine books).

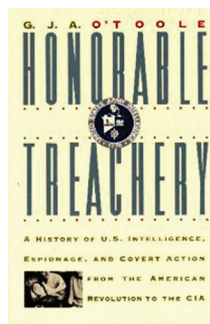


JAPAN

For information on pre-1940 Japanese intelligence (besides a chapter in Ernest May's book cited above), see the chapter by J.W.M. Chapman, "Japanese Intelligence, 1918-1945: A Suitable Case for Treatment," in Christopher Andrew and James Noakes (eds), *Intelligence and International Relations (1900-1945)* (1987, Exeter UK: Exeter University Publications).

AMERICA

Useful material on American intelligence services between the world wars is in an archive-based study by Robert G. Angevin, "Gentlemen Do Read Each Other's Mail: American Intelligence in the Interwar Era," *Intelligence and National Security* (Vol.7, No.2, 1992, pp. 1-29). And G.J.A. O'Toole's general survey of American intelligence history has useful chapters (25-29) on 1918 to 1939: *Honorable Treachery* (1991, Atlantic Monthly Press). The Office of the National Counterintelligence Executive has posted on its website a loosely edited but interesting and detailed history of US counterintelligence. See http://www.ncix.gov/publications/ci_references/index.php.



Douglas L. Wheeler is Professor of History Emeritus, University of New Hampshire and a previous contributor to the *Guide to the Study of Intelligence*. See his articles "A Guide to the History of Intelligence in the Age of Empires, 1500-1800," *Intelligencer*, Vol. 18, No. 3, Summer/Fall 2011; "A Guide to the History of Intelligence, 1800-1918," *Intelligencer*, Vol, 19, No. 1, and "A Note About Intelligence Historiography," *Intelligencer*, Vol. 18, No. 3, Summer/Fall 2011.