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The Literature of Intelligence:

‘Another Kind of Need to Know.’

by Douglas L. Wheeler, Ph.D.

“…..What does he next prepare?
Whence will he move to attack?
By water, earth or air?-
How can we head him back?…..”

— Rudyard Kipling, The Spies’ March, 1913

Introduction

Today few would dispute the notion that there is a literature of intelligence. In 1955, however, Dr. Sherman Kent, the father of contemporary American intelligence analysis, argued that there really was no literature of intelligence and that American intelligence services required a literature. While such a literature is a relatively recent phenomenon, one should ask: Was there a literature of intelligence in 1955 and, if so, what was it? And today how might one define, classify and assess what is now a much larger body of literature?

The literature of intelligence and studies related thereto is now a vast, multi-disciplinary body of work in many languages. It includes not only printed books and articles but also a growing online presence, which can be perishable.

Unlike better established and larger bodies of literature on other topics (for example, military studies), the literature of intelligence studies is more recent, and its quality and reliability more uneven. Authoritative, critical scholarly commentary on it is a recent phenomenon. Some of it remains more contentious than aspects of military studies, and an unknown part of it remains classified. Besides the two questions above, this article provides background and answers to other questions: Why does such literature matter and why should students in intelligence studies, whatever their specialty, have a need to know essential components?

The Literature of Intelligence in 1955

— A Brief Review —

When Sherman Kent wrote his article in Studies In Intelligence he was correct that his profession needed a literature but was mistaken that there was no literature of intelligence of any sort. There was little on that topic which most concerned Kent — the theory and practice of intelligence analysis. Six years before he had published a book on the topic. By the mid-1950s there was a growing body of intelligence-related books and articles in a variety of subjects.

In fact, a major turning point in the history of this literature was World War I. In the decade or two following, a small flood of publications about secret aspects of the war came out in Britain, continental Europe and North America. Literature about international espionage won a growing readership, according to publishers’ tracking of book sales and ranking their popularity. An example was a 1933 memoir by a former British diplomat involved in spying in Bolshevik Russia that hit the top of the non-fiction book sales charts in the United States. It is worth noting that events described in many of these books contained revelations about several Soviet intelligence services.

Before 1955, the taxonomy of the literature of intelligence was not as complex as today. There were still relatively few categories, including spy fiction

3. This includes not only literature about intelligence but also analyses about this literature.
5. Robert Bruce Lockhart’s British Agent (New York: Putnam, 1933); was one of several books by former secret agents published between 1933 and 1952, which achieved best-selling status in the United States as well as in Britain. A British feature film, based in part on Lockhart’s account, starred Leslie Howard and was released in 1934.
with spy novels and stories, as well as non-fiction works with the memoirs of former spies or spymasters, anthologies of recollections of former spies, surveys of spy history and historical accounts of spying in World War I, including well-documented warnings of American vulnerability to foreign spying in the 1930s, and memoirs of the early Soviet defectors (1928-1939). While a few German and French scholars, and one German spymaster, published accounts of espionage history, as early as the 1880s and 1890s, it was not until after World War I that a handful of British, American, French and German scholars, journalists and spymasters began to probe systematically the history of spying in international affairs. In the footsteps of British spy fiction writers Oppenheim, Le Queux and Buchan, a new generation began to publish spy novels in the 1930s.

In the late 1940s, dozens of books and many newspaper stories were published in the United States, Britain and France on World War II Allied secret operations and stories of OSS actions. Many were sensationalized personal accounts. In addition a new genre of serious intelligence literature started to emerge. This was intelligence history in a popular form. An early example was Richard Rowan’s intriguing, but eccentric historical romp of 1937, on spying from pre-biblical times to 1936, The Story of Secret Service, which sold well but was soon out of print.

7. A former British intelligence officer in World War I warned about the United States’ vulnerability to German spies in the late 1930s. See Captain Henry Landau, The Enemy Within: The Inside Story of German Sabotage in America (New York: Putnam’s, 1937).
8. The 1882 memoir (edited by J. Auerbach) of Prussian spymaster, Wilhelm Stieber was probably the first published memoir of a European state’s secret intelligence service, and was finally translated to English in a 1980 edition: Wilhelm Stieber, The Chancellor’s Spy: The memoir of Walther Nicolai, chief of Germany’s Military Intelligence Service in World War I was translated into English and published as The German Secret Service (London, 1924). There was also the general study of the subject by W.N. Klemovskov, L’espionnage militaire en temps de guerre (Paris, 1895) and an account by F. Routier, L’espionnage et la trahison en temps de paix et en temps de guerre (Paris, 1911). A pioneering scholar of intelligence studies was French historian-archivist, George Bourgin, at France’s Archives Nationales, Paris, the author of “Espionage,” in Volume 8 (Edwa-Extract) Encyclopaedia Britannica (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1929 edition; 1944 reprinting), pp. 712-714.
10. Rowan’s 1937 classic of 732 pages sold well as a Literary Published in 1941 before Pearl Harbor, Terror In Our Time: The Secret Service of Surprise Attack, was Rowan’s sensational exposé of pre-Dec. 7, 1941 Japanese spying and potential sabotage activities, and although it was not the best seller that his 1937 book was it did arouse the interest of the FBI readers who began surveillance of his public lectures, opened an investigation on him, and questioned him as to where he got his information on sabotage of US targets. A major milestone came with Kent’s key 1955 article, “The Need for an Intelligence Literature.” Sherman Kent, a former history professor from Yale University who joined the CIA’s Board of National Estimates, became, in effect, the father of contemporary intelligence assessment. He had suggested in 1941 the US intelligence capability was at a low point but that fourteen years later in 1955, the profession of intelligence in the United States had come of age and now required its own literature. For Kent, intelligence was not only a “profession” but a distinct “discipline.” He argued that, like all disciplines, it too needed a ...
literature so that, however secret the work of intelligence was, there could be publications that would allow the public to study the discipline’s “methodology.” A literature of intelligence, too, served a more subtle purpose — as a hedge against budget cutbacks or post-war demobilization of intelligence services, as had happened after the end of both World War I and World War II. Additionally, Kent saw a practical reason for such a literature at a nervous moment in the new nuclear age. That was to leave a printed legacy for readers who might survive a war with the Soviet Union. From the Berlin airlift crisis of 1948–49, to the August 1949 Soviet test of its first atomic bomb, to the 1950 beginning of the Korean War, and to other war and spy scares, Americans were fearful of a nuclear catastrophe.13

After the U-2 incident (May 1960) and the Bay of Pigs debacle (April 1961), and the consequent greater public awareness of previously secret American intelligence activities, scholars and journalists began to examine the intelligence profession and the literature of intelligence began to expand.

Characterizing the Literature of Intelligence Studies

Like ‘classics’ in any field, notable works in the literature of intelligence are of enduring value and contain a notability beyond a simple tally of sales at any point in time. Classics embody high standards in written expression, authenticity of sources, unique stories, and original thought.

Some works have had an important impact on historical events by influencing leaders, helping change government policy, and alerting and inspiring public opinion. I have selected the following five books and a collection of leaked secret documents published in scores of newspapers and magazines which appeared between 1903 and 2013. They were made available to the public by British, Irish and American authors and, however controversial the materials they presented, they inspired later generations of students in the field of intelligence studies and also had an impact on both public opinion and government policy. Some of the material, such as the Snowden leaks, which began within a year or two the Royal Navy established a naval reserve force to use the sailing skills and knowledge of amateur sailors. The Balfour government arranged for the establishment of more fleet ports in Scotland. Seldom has a single book had such an unexpected, vital impact.14

Some books have influenced later spy novelists and presented a more realistic portrayal of spying. Some have been used to teach about secret work in intelligence schools. Such is the case of the celebrated British novelist W. Somerset Maugham’s spy stories collected in the 1928 book, Ashenden. It is a memoir only lightly disguised as fiction. Maugham, who was trained as a medical doctor but became a celebrated playwright and novelist, served in British secret intelligence in Switzerland and Russia in World War I. Despite Maugham’s view that intelligence work was not only tediously boring but also amoral and futile, it was said that British intelligence recommended that newly recruited agents-in-training read Ashenden. Like The Riddle Of the Sands, the slim volume has long remained in print.15

An important book on secret writing or cryptology was the memoir by Herbert O. Yardley, The American Black Chamber, published in 1931.16 two years after Yardley lost his job as a codebreaker with the State Department and Navy sponsored unit in New York. Unemployed and in need of funds, he wrote the book simply for money. The author’s motives are much less complex than the consequences of the book’s publication. Its wide readership, including in Japan, influenced American and Japanese cryptography and adversely impacted American capabilities before

13. Perhaps it was no coincidence that a popular hit song of 1949 had a lyric, which advised radio listeners to “Enjoy yourself; it’s later than you think.”

World War II. The American Black Chamber was an early example of a government employee “leaking” diplomatic and military secrets, and led to the government rapidly passing a law to prevent him from publishing another book along the same lines. The impact of Yardley’s sensational book has become clothed in myth and half-truth. Only recently have historians determined the actual effects of the book’s publication. The Japanese did not alter their code system and move to mechanical coding just because of Yardley’s book; this evolution was already underway before mid-1931. The fears of damage to American intelligence work were overblown, according to historian David Kahn; rather, the long-term effects of the book later during World War II were positive for American codebreaking.  

In 1964, a best-selling book by two Washington-based journalists, David Wise and Thomas Ross, The Invisible Government, revealed much about American intelligence services that was new to the public. Until this book, American writers had discussed intelligence-related incidents such as the U-2 affair and the Bay of Pigs fiasco largely as news stories, but had not ventured to offer a full picture of our intelligence system. Wise and Ross’ book focused mainly on the Bay of Pigs fiasco largely as news stories, but had not ventured to offer a full picture of our intelligence system. Wise and Ross’ book focused mainly on the CIA but it was also one of the first works to reveal basic information on the most secret and newest of America’s intelligence services, the National Security Agency, established in 1952.  

What came to be called the “Pentagon Papers” gained public attention in 1970-71 when a senior, high level Federal government employee leaked copies of secret materials about the Vietnam War to several American Senators and the press. What began as controversy over American policies in the expanding Vietnam war, assumed crisis proportions when secret Pentagon documents were leaked by a senior policy consultant and researcher for the RAND Corporation who was Vietnam expert Daniel Ellsberg. Some of the material reached The New York Times, which in June 1971 began to publish extracts. This provoked a constitutional crisis when President Nixon’s administration sought to prevent that newspaper from publishing them. In its scale, contents and consequences, this was no ordinary small leak of information by a disgruntled government employee; the material in question, 7,000 pages in 47 volumes, was a Pentagon commissioned, in-house secret history of US-Vietnamese relations from World War II to 1967. For ten days, by court order, The New York Times was prevented from publishing extracts of the material Ellsberg had given them, before the Supreme Court allowed publication. When President Nixon sought to persecute and discredit Ellsberg by means of obtaining and revealing Ellsberg’s psychiatrist’s records, the affair became part of the Watergate scandals, ending with the resignation of President Nixon in August 1974.

A final example of an influential and controversial leak about intelligence is the still unfolding story surrounding Edward Snowden’s leaks of National Security Agency documents. Unlike our earlier examples, what Snowden obtained and has leaked in segments has not been collected or published in book form. So far it remains dispersed in thousands of newspaper and magazines stories or online in websites and blogs. Snowden’s main focus was NSA, but there were also significant revelations about the signal intelligence services of the other so-called “Five Eyes” (UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand). Snowden’s leaks have provoked a vigorous, if nervous, national and global debate on surveillance and privacy in the United States and abroad. The scale of his leaks is unprecedented, dwarfing those of previous large-scale leakers such as Julian Assange’s “Wikileaks” and Bradley Manning.

20. While no book yet published has collected significant portions of Snowden’s leaked documents, extracts and summaries are found scattered in several biographical accounts of Snowden’s life and activities, and extracts have been published by many newspapers all over the world, including most prominently the first newspapers which published Snowden materials in June 2013: in UK and the USA, The Guardian (previously known as The Manchester Guardian), The Washington Post, The New York Times, and in Germany, Der Spiegel. But scores of other periodicals as well as online websites published extracts as well. The newspaper response was truly global. There is a breathless, poorly sourced, hagiographic account byTHR Guardian journalist, Luke Harding, The Snowden Files: The Inside Story of the World’s Most Wanted Man (New York: Vintage, 2014). Glenn Greenwald, the American lawyer, journalist and blogger who was one of the first to work with Snowden and is based in Brazil, has a forthcoming biography, No Place To Hide: Snowden, NSA and…, slated to be published in the US in late April 2014; some of Snowden’s materials are published in spurs in Glenn Greenwald’s online blog, called “The Intercept.”

21. Current best estimates of the size of Snowden’s leaks range from approximately 1.8 to 2 million files, and this is a conservative, early count as the story further unfolds. These estimates are cited in Daniel Soar, “Incendiary Devices,” a review of Luke
The National Security Agency’s surveillance capabilities has a literature of its own, beginning with important books by Dan Brown (a spy novel) and works by James Bamford and Frank Donner published between 1980 and 2004, as well as many related articles.

Conclusion

Trends in the post-1955 patterns of intelligence literature are worth summarizing. The decade of the 1960s saw literature stimulated in part by the sensational intelligence-related news stories of 1960 and 1962 from the USSR to Cuba, including the Cuban Missile crisis. As the public fascination with spy stories was exploited by popular television series about spies from the early 1960s to the early 1970s, the literature grew after 1972-74 with the publication of memoirs and reports of British intelligence officers recounting once closely held “ULTRA” secret and “the Double-Cross system.” In the late 1970s, scholarly books began to be published which documented how secret intelligence had been a hidden dimension of diplomatic history. Finally, in the 1980s, British and American scholars began to publish capsule histories of their intelligence services, and a respectable early encyclopedia of intelligence history was published. In conclusion, the first two scholarly, refereed journals devoted entirely to intelligence studies began publishing in the late 1980s in the UK and USA.

Humor in the Literature of Intelligence

Humor and satire in the literature of intelligence are not included in the bibliography that follows. But it should be noted that there is a modest body of literature with or about humor in intelligence. It is not limited to the American humor books by former CIA officers cited in a note below. There are also such works in Britain, including satirical cartoons on intelligence subjects in magazines. It is interesting to note and may be significant that much of the humor material this writer has discovered focuses more on foreign rather than domestic intelligence services. This aspect of the field is experiencing only a modest growth.

Nearly sixty years after Kent’s prescient article, there is not only a literature of intelligence of considerable dimensions, but it is larger, more diverse and more exotic than Kent might have imagined. To the benefit of many it includes many scholarly disciplines from the sciences to the arts. It has also provided resources for academic approaches to intelligence studies at many institutions of higher education in various colleges and departments. Besides courses in law schools, there are also relevant courses of study in many colleges of arts and sciences in departments such as government and politics, national security, history, sociology and international relations. There are also intelligence-related courses taught in the armed services’ academies and universities, which offer various graduate degrees. Intelligence studies are no longer at the margins of academia but have an increasingly important and central place in the classroom, in the electronic media and in the publishing world.

Readings for Instructors

Listed below is a selection of the outstanding, well-written and enduring examples of American and British intelligence literature. Though some of the foreign language literature has been translated into English, a significant quantity remains untranslated and only in the original languages.

25. A brief list includes sections of the anthology of Graham Greene and Hugh Greene, The Spy’s Bedside Book (London: Rupert-Hart Davis, 1957); a recent work by a former CIA officer, Ed Mickolus, The Secret Book of CIA Humor (Gretna: LA: Pelican, 2011), which has a suggestive bibliography, and could include a satirical novel by Scottish-American writer, Compton Mackenzie, Water on the Brain (1933) and Graham Greene’s classic send-up of both MI-6 and early James Bond novels: Our Man In Havana (1958). Unlike many other such publications in Britain, beginning in World War I and extending into the 1960s, there were a number of humorous cartoons related to the subject of espionage in London’s Punch magazine and less frequently in the American magazine, The New Yorker, especially during the mid-Cold War years.

26. AFIO lists colleges and universities with intelligence-related courses on its website (www.afio.com/12_academic.htm).

27. One of the most useful bibliographies related to intelligence
Intelligence Textbooks

Histories
Andrew, Christopher, Defend The Realm. The Authorized History of MI6 (New York: Knopf, 2009). This was an official history of the Security Service.
Andrew, Christopher, Her Majesty’s Secret Service: The Making of the British Intelligence Community (New York: Viking, 1986). This covers the period up to 1950.
Winterbotham, F.W. The Ultra Secret (New York: Dell, 1974).

Biographies and Memoirs
Baer, Robert, See No Evil: The True Story of a Ground Soldier in the CIA’s War on Terrorism (New York: Three Rivers, 2002).
Assessments of Intelligence
(including of spies)


Fiction
(including interpretations of spy fiction)


Furst, Alan, Spies Of The Balkans (New York: Random House, 2010).


Le Carre, John, Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy (New York: Knopf, 1974).


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