



A Note About Intelligence Historiography

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Historians face a challenge. The history of intelligence and its impact on world affairs has only been addressed recently by scholars. Not until after World War I did journalists, former spies and a few academics begin to publish about secret intelligence. American writer, Richard Wilmot Rowan, one of the rare students of intelligence history, in his encyclopedic 1937 book, *The Story of Secret Service*, wrote that historians had ignored the history of espionage. Spying, he observed, had had a greater impact on history than on historians.

The extent to which spying has influenced the course of history remains a debatable topic, but in the last forty years more historians have focused on intelligence. Today there is substantial intelligence literature available to students, especially for the period beginning with World War I. In the 1970s pioneering scholars of intelligence history declared that the subject was the “missing dimension” of diplomatic history. The same could be said for military and political history.

Understanding intelligence history and the influence of intelligence on history presents interesting challenges. The subject’s very terminology is confusing. Take the word “intelligence,” which in its English military-political connotation (not its educational definition as ‘the ability to think’) has at least three different meanings. Intelligence is a special kind of information, a process of obtaining it, and an organization that does this work. Then there is the deceptive, secretive nature of the subject, the routine denial of public access to intelligence records, the debatable quality of intelligence produced, and a plethora of

myths and legends that distort public understanding. Other complicating factors include the fact that in the public mind there has long been a stigma attached to espionage, an occupational hazard which can discourage recruitment for this work and confounded some scholars who have considered studying the fraught topic. A further difficulty in writing intelligence history is that even if a student discovers what intelligence was available to a commander in battle, it is not always clear what the commander knew and when. And finally, it is the victors and commanders of battles that usually write the histories; rarely do the spies and spymasters.

Even with these challenges, instructors and students can take advantage of the ongoing electronic revolution and consult a growing intelligence literature in print as well as online. Conditions for studying the

subject have markedly improved, but even so one confronts the historian’s traditional dilemmas: how to distinguish between fact and opinion, between truth and fiction, and how to measure the impact of intelligence on history. 🐦

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History is the people’s discipline—the only academic subject that demands no special professional training. Some of my favorite history books are by lawyers, journalists, scientists and nuns. To write well about history you do not need a Ph.D., just a few rare but accessible qualities: insatiable curiosity, critical intellect, disciplined imagination, indefatigability in the pursuit of truth and a slightly weird vocation for trying to get to know dead people by studying the sources they have left us.

— Felipe Fernández-Armesto, in “Faulty Navigators: Seeking to revolutionize views of the Age of Exploration, four books instead reveal more about the state of popular history,” *Wall Street Journal*, 17 September 2011.