Intelligence in War: Knowledge of the Enemy from Napoleon to al-Qaeda

By John Keegan. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003. 387 pages.

Reviewed by Michael Warner

For a generation now, John Keegan's histories have been lucid, literate, and enjoyable. I joined the legion of his fans upon reading his classic, *The Face of Battle*, longer ago than I like to admit. Indeed, I took his latest, *Intelligence in War,* on a pair of flights recently and was not disappointed.

With that said, Keegan aims higher than great airport reading in his latest work of military history, and he misses. He is a champion paraphraser of others' works, scanning the efforts of academic and official historians for revealing details and making juxtapositions not infrequently missed by their authors. *Intelligence in War* is an interesting collection of vignettes, some about battles and campaigns and others about intelligence work. The problem comes when Keegan tries to mold the two subjects into a larger synthesis.

Keegan's thesis is that, for command, intelligence is marginal. It can help, but it "does not point out unerringly the path to victory."[1] *Intelligence in War* traces the development of the art of intelligence—particularly its specialties of codebreaking and espionage—through episodes ranging from Lord Nelson's chase of the French Mediterranean fleet and Stonewall Jackson's Shenandoah Valley campaign to the World War II battles of Midway and Crete. No one narrates a battle better than John Keegan. In this latest work, he extends his skills as well to two major campaigns of World War II, the Allied struggle against German U-boats and the subsequent scramble to neutralize Hitler's V-weapons. These cases, in his telling, support his larger point that decision in war "is always the result of a fight, and, in combat, willpower always counts for more than foreknowledge."[2] As he states in his conclusion, intelligence, "however good, is not necessarily the means to victory . . . ultimately, it is force, not fraud or forethought, that counts."[3]

This argument fills all but the final pages of *Intelligence in War*. It is not an original thesis, but it is not a bad one either. The eminent intelligence historian, David Kahn, penned something similar in 1991, when he declared intelligence to be "a secondary factor in war." Keegan cites Kahn approvingly, and one can think of no working historian of intelligence who argues otherwise. Thus, it is difficult to credit Keegan's unsourced complaint that "conventional wisdom" has deemed intelligence to be "the necessary key to success in military operations."[4]

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[1] Keegan, 6.
[2] *Ibid.*, 25.
[3] *Ibid.*, 334.
[4] *Ibid.*, 25.

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If a more serious objection may be raised against the first 95 percent of *Intelligence in War*, it is against Keegan's term "operational intelligence." He uses it to connote both tactical intelligence in battle *and* the intelligence that matters at what American staff colleges call the theater or "operational" level of war (where a series of battles or a larger campaign is managed). That conflation of terms is distracting enough, but still another level of intelligence in war is conspicuously absent in Keegan's book: strategic intelligence for the "national command authority." The strategic level is where the interests and objectives of the nation as a whole get translated into government-wide policy. National leaders have long sought clandestine as well as open means to understand and affect the plans and actions of foreign powers, in peace and in war, and that is intelligence support of a very different character than that used by generals and admirals engaging the enemy.

Had Keegan ended *Intelligence in War* with this debunking of the "current overestimation of the importance of intelligence in warfare," these quibbles would be about the worst that could be said about his book.[5] Unfortunately, he proceeds to present a second thesis that, while it might eventually be found to have merit, is so sweeping and so scantily supported that it encumbers the rest of the book.

This takes a little explaining. What irks Keegan is "the intermingling of operational intelligence with, and contamination by, subversion, the attempt to win military advantage by covert means."[6] What does he mean here? The example he cites is that of Britain's wartime Special Operations Executive (SOE), created in 1940 pursuant to Winston Churchill's famous directive to "set Europe ablaze." SOE existed to make things hot for the Germans by inserting "parties of agents, usually by parachute, into occupied territory, to make contact with the local resistance organizations, if they existed, to arrange for the delivery of weapons and supplies and carry out espionage and sabotage."[7]

While dashing and brave, SOE's operatives did not fare well. Keegan suggests that "subversion" was an untimely child of Churchill's uneven genius. Churchill, with his romantic notions of policing the Empire and his memories of how the Boers had briefly frustrated the British Army, "presumed as late as 1940 that a repetition of Boer intransigence in a German-occupied Europe" would prove equally distracting to Hitler. Worse, he imagined that "the soldiers of Nazi Germany would refrain from atrocity in the face of resistance, as [Churchill's] Tommy comrades-in-arms had refrained in a still-unsubdued South Africa."[8] In truth, argues Keegan, "[i]t was all an illusion." SOE hardly weakened Hitler's clutch on occupied Europe. On balance, SOE did little net harm in Western Europe, where its actions prompted vicious German reprisals but also helped to revive a sense of national pride in the captive nations. But SOE made rather a botch of things in the Balkans, "supplying much of the equipment which enabled the partisans to establish Communist governments after the war, and also endorsing indirectly their right to do so."[9]

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5 *Ibid.*, 335.
6 *Ibid.*
7 *Ibid.*, 342.
8 *Ibid.*, 345.

Keegan briefly argues these points—which could merit a volume of their own—to support his claim that the myth of SOE and subversion has distorted both "the theory and practice of secret war, and therefore of 'intelligence,' ever since."[10] "In retrospect," he concludes, "the confusion of 'resistance' (covert operations against the enemy, usually based on the concept of opposition to a totalitarian occupation or oppressive political takeover masquerading as a liberation movement) with 'intelligence' (properly the attack on an opponent's espionage and cipher systems) achieved nothing but harm to both."[11]

Leveling this indictment at SOE might be just, but generalizing it across the Cold War and beyond—and then not even examining the evidence—is just not cricket. The many conflicts since World War II might support Keegan's warning that espionage and subversion and "operational intelligence" should be stored in separate organizational containers. But he offers little in the way of examples to buttress his case—the only one he provides, oddly enough, is Britain's 1982 reconquest of the Falklands. The thought occurred to Keegan to look to other countries and their experiences, but he implies that such an investigation cannot be done properly, given the lack of published sources. He notes, for instance, that America's Central Intelligence Agency has always combined intelligence gathering with covert action under one roof. This is an arrangement he finds "undesirable," but he tactfully defers to American practice: "In a world of secrets, which does not disclose what it does or what it knows, it is not for the outsider to judge that such a joint mission was ill conceived. The character of the CIA's enemies, of whom there are many, suggests that it has right broadly on its side."[12]

Keegan need not have been so deferential. The CIA's creation and the assignment of its various missions, desirable or not, are largely a matter of public record by now. Scholars for years have mined declassified official accounts by Arthur Darling, Anne Karalekas, Ludwell Montague, and Thomas Troy, and the actual documents cited by these authors are now beginning to emerge. Several popular histories, such as those of Peter Grose, Evan Thomas, John Ranelagh, and David Rudgers, have also examined the CIA in the early Cold War in sufficient detail to provide Keegan with source material. Reading them might not have changed his conclusions, but it surely would have sharpened them and given his readers more confidence in his judgments.

"Even excellent Homer nods," the Latin adage goes, and even when Keegan nods he writes in the fertile British tradition of wide learning, clear prose, and broad comparative scope. This seems to be an almost uniquely British talent these days, and so I hope we shall see many more books from him. Indeed, he should write another on intelligence in war.

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[9] *Ibid.*, 347.
[10] *Ibid.*, 344.
[11] *Ibid.*, 345.
[12] *Ibid.*, 348.