

Defence Intelligence and the Cold War: Britain's Joint Intelligence Bureau, 1945–1964

Huw Dylan (Oxford University Press, 2014), 256 pp., index.

Reviewed by Ryan Shaffer

Huw Dylan examines the Joint Intelligence Bureau (JIB) under Major General Kenneth Strong during the Cold War. Using declassified records from around the world and private papers from important intelligence figures, Dylan explores internal British debates about centralizing intelligence and the JIB's role until it merged with the Service Intelligence and created the Defence Intelligence Staff (DIS). Tracing the Joint Intelligence Bureau's mission to acquire accurate maps of the Soviet Union to its new mission of analyzing Soviet atomic bombs and missiles, the book follows the JIB's expanding role and broader impact on international intelligence during the Cold War. While not as well-known as Britain's Security Service or the Secret Intelligence Service, the Joint Intelligence Bureau was significant in acquiring intelligence about Soviet military and economic weaknesses.

Following the Second World War, the British military and political establishment saw the need to keep the wartime intelligence structure in peacetime. To properly do this, the Joint Intelligence Committee argued that "first class" intelligence would mean less financial investment in war preparations. Several reforms were instituted, including better "efficiency" and "preparedness" under the Joint Intelligence Bureau, which was "designed to collect and collate economic, topographic, and operational intelligence." (10) In contrast to the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) that continued its wartime role coordinating interdepartmental intelligence and drafting reports, the Joint Intelligence Bureau was created for assessing economic, scientific, and topographic data. Dylan finds that shortly after the war the JIB proved those "who believed that central, more civilianized organizations could perform certain tasks previously assigned to military intelligence had gained a degree of ascendancy." (38)

At the start of the Cold War, the JIB's main focus was topographical intelligence, which grew in importance when the Soviets gained nuclear capability and

Britain needed to know how to knock out Soviet air and rail transport before an attack. Dylan argues that the JIB successfully filled its purpose acquiring intelligence from a range of sources, exploiting intelligence from Germany and gathering intelligence that previously would have been duplicated by military departments. He describes how, in the first few years, the JIB proved to be "a collating and analysis institution that planners could depend on as a national data warehouse of military-relevant information." (68) Another major focus for the JIB was economic intelligence, including trade surveillance, which was used to formulate embargoes and plan economic warfare. It was tasked with monitoring shipping and recommending banning goods desired by communist countries, but this proved difficult as some items, like rubber, were valuable British exports. He highlights specific cases where the JIB "was instrumental in analysing the Soviet economy and determining which commodities were to be controlled." (105)

Though the Joint Intelligence Bureau remained involved in the economic Cold War, it also assessed Soviet bombs and missiles during the 1950s. After the defeat of Nazi Germany, the JIC directed the JIB to collect intelligence about "guided weapons," including bomber and missile threats, and this became more urgent after the Soviets tested their first hydrogen bomb in 1955. Concurrently, "the principle of centralization was gaining support in Whitehall," which the JIB leadership argued would improve intelligence organization. (122) In analyzing "gaps" about bombers and atomic intelligence, the author explains how the JIB's assessment of the Soviet Union's "capabilities were not developing as quickly or significantly as the Americans believed or the Soviets claimed." (145) By the early 1960s, American and British intelligence had an improved view of the Soviet military threat because of better technical and human intelligence, and the JIB's influence increased with the coordination of data about the atomic threat.

The Cold War resulted in “unprecedented” international cooperation, not only with American allies, but “the JIB’s international liaison arrangements extended further, to sister agencies and to international business.” (157) Dylan shows the close connection with US intelligence, with exchanges of data and people, while Commonwealth agencies similar to the JIB in Australia and Canada proved important in maintaining Britain’s influence in the globalized world of intelligence. The book closes by discussing the move to centralize civilian intelligence, with JIB’s merging with Service Intelligence to create the Defence Intelligence Staff (DIS) in 1964 and argues that “the JIB was the nucleus of the newly formed DIS.” (184) Dylan draws parallels between the DIS and the United States Defense Intelligence Agency, but notes that finances were more of an issue for the British, which necessitated reorganizing military and nonmilitary focuses, such as economics and science, for better efficiency.

Defence Intelligence and the Cold War is a well-researched study on the Joint Intelligence Bureau’s history and internal debates about centralizing British intelli-

gence. Dylan successfully explains its origins to prevent duplication with other intelligence services and how it adapted to the Cold War reality by gathering maps of Soviet terrain in preparation for military conflict. Needing to cut costs, the JIB built connections with foreign intelligence agencies and businesses to obtain data about Soviet military capabilities.

The book shows how the JIB was involved in key Cold War intelligence gathering and gained “a surer grasp of the Soviet threat,” but also how it shaped government policy with scientific and economic intelligence. (211) While the book provides solid analysis about the JIB’s successes as well as problems, more detail about actual operations—as opposed to organizational and bureaucratic history—would have demonstrated the JIB’s broader impact. In addition, the author successfully compares and discusses links with American and commonwealth agencies, but analysis of connections with Western European countries would have improved the international dimension of the book.

