Eavesdropping on the Emperor: Interrogators and Codebreakers in Britain's War With Japan
Peter Kornicki (Oxford University Press, 2021), 402, maps, photographs, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by Stephen C. Mercado

What good is intelligence collection without exploitation? What would be the value in war for an organization to break the enemy's naval code, recover a battlefield document, or interrogate a captured airman if there were no linguists to read the deciphered telegram, translate the recovered document, or interpret the prisoner's answers?

Peter Kornicki, emeritus professor of Japanese at Cambridge University, has written a history of British language officers who, after struggling in wartime crash courses to learn Japanese, applied their hard-won knowledge to Britain's fight against Japan during World War II. His reason for doing so, stated on the book's dedication page, is to bring to light the contributions, "never recognized or rewarded," of those linguists. His book is, in a sense, a sequel to Michael Smith's excellent history of how Britain broke Japanese-language codes.[1] Where Smith's focus was on interception and codebreaking, Kornicki's concern is how linguists translated Japanese, whether from deciphered messages, plain text, or speech, into English for military use.

Kornicki's book is a recent addition to the growing body of intelligence literature in recent years on the war against Imperial Japan.[2] While Britain's Japanese linguists in World War II have received little recognition, US publishers have produced a number of books that highlight the accomplishments of US language officers.[3] Japanese authors have also written of how US and British intelligence organizations met the challenge of the Japanese language.[4]

Eavesdropping on the Emperor begins with the author tracing the downward trajectory of Anglo-Japanese relations, from the formal alliance concluded in January 1902 to Imperial Japan's invasion of Britain's East Asia colonies in December 1941,[5] and describing the near total lack of Japanese-language officers at the war's start. Kornicki then recounts the rush to put together short courses to teach enough military Japanese to make language officers of men and women who, for the most part, had no prior knowledge of what one British instructor termed "perhaps the most soul-destroying and unrewarding of all languages."[6] (85) At the Bedford Japanese School, the School of Oriental and African Studies, and Bletchley Park in Britain, as well as in such far-flung corners of the empire as the School of Japanese Instruction at Simla, a hill station in British India, students struggled through intensive courses of written and spoken Japanese. Unlike the US Army, which recruited from the large pool of first- and second-generation Japanese Americans to train Japanese-language officers, Britain followed a path similar to that of the US Navy in recruiting top-notch students in general and classicists in particular.[7]

British wartime students of Japanese faced the daunting challenge of learning in weeks or months what academic experts asserted would take three years. Many folded under the pressure. One instructor of an 11-week course in oral Japanese for monitoring radio transmissions colorfully explained the stark divide of student failure or success: "After the fifth week they're either carried away screaming or they're nipponified."[a] (91–92) The written language was perhaps an even greater challenge. Student Patrick Field's classroom notes indicated that features of Japanese include the absence of definite and indefinite articles, no clear distinction between singular and plural, the common lack in a sentence of a subject pronoun, and verbs that are found at the end of sentences. As if such challenges were not enough, students would confront deciphered Japanese texts in blocks of Roman letters and struggle to determine by whatever context was available where to divide the blocks into discrete words and what meaning to assign those words in a language with vastly more homophones than English.

British intelligence organizations employed the newly trained language officers across the globe in the war. Bletchley Park, the British estate that housed the

a. The Japanese-language name for Japan is Nippon or Nihon. From the Meiji Restoration (1868) to the end of World War II, Japan was known as Dai Nippon Teikoku, rendered as the Empire of Greater Japan.

Government Code and Cipher School (GC&CS), employed some of them. In Africa, other linguists served on Mauritius (then a British colony) and Kilindini, Kenya. In South Asia, linguists came to grips with the language in Ceylon (today Sri Lanka) and British India. Still others worked in Australia or with officers of the British Commonwealth and their US allies in such units as General MacArthur's Allied Translator and Interpreter Service (ATIS). In the field, linguists shouldered their heavy dictionaries in backpacks into Burma (today Myanmar) on the British Army's return to the colony it had lost to the Imperial Japanese Army in early 1942. Some British and Australian linguists even joined in MacArthur's return to the Philippines.

Around the world, with each message translated and each prisoner interrogated, British language officers provided building blocks of intelligence needed to understand the enemy. As Kornicki illustrates, many of those blocks were small, as is often the case with individual intelligence reports, but some proved of major importance. In April 1942, most of the British Eastern Fleet at Trincomalee, Ceylon, escaped an attack from a superior force of the Imperial Japanese Navy, retreating to the safety of Kilindini to fight again another day, after linguists translated in advance an intercepted and decoded Japanese message. (130) In Burma, the translation at one point by linguists far from the front—called "backroom boys" at their corps headquarters—of a message in plain text that pinpointed the movement of Japanese troops enabled Gurkhas of the 33rd Corps to stage a jungle ambush. (145) In the Philippines, a British Commonwealth wireless unit passed on translations of Japanese messages that gave away the position of enemy troop ships bringing reinforcements to the beleaguered Japanese units defending Leyte against MacArthur's forces, resulting in one instance in the destruction on November 11, 1944, of an entire enemy convoy. (226)

At the end of the war, British language officers served as interpreters in the surrender of various Japanese commanders in the field, participated in the search for and trial of war criminals, and performed other tasks. Many left active duty not long after the war's end. Others went to Japan to serve as members of the British Commonwealth Occupation Force. Comprising units from Britain, India, Australia, and New Zealand, BCOF was responsible for the occupation of Shikoku (one of the four main islands in the Japanese archipelago) and the southern part of the main island of Honshu from 1946 until Japan regained sovereignty in 1952.[8]

For decades after V-J Day, many of Britain's wartime linguists worked in careers related to Japan or the classics. As was the case among their US counterparts, some British language officers became Japan experts. Others returned to the study of the classics. Sir Hugh Cortazzi, assigned at war's end to a mobile unit of the Combined Services Detailed Interrogation Center (CSDIC) in British India, served his country years later as ambassador to Japan. Richard Storry, who withdrew just in time from the besieged fortress at Singapore, fought at the battle for Imphal, participated in the subsequent campaign to retake Burma, and became a professor of Japanese studies at Oxford University. John Chadwick, who at Bletchley Park translated highly technical Japanese documents after serving earlier in the war as an Italian linguist, resumed his prewar classical studies at Cambridge University and became a noted scholar of classical Greek there.[a] (288)

Kornicki's story of Britain's unsung Japanese-language officers, a tale now well told, provides the reader a wealth of information on how Britain trained so many linguists to such great effect in World War II. *Eavesdropping* is an excellent resource, featuring many maps and photographs to supplement the text, complemented by an extensive bibliography and index.

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The reviewer: Stephen C. Mercado, a retired language officer in the CIA Open Source Enterprise, is a frequent reviewer of books in foreign languages for *Studies* and other journals. He is in his fifth decade of learning Japanese.

a. At Cambridge, Chadwick worked with a colleague to decipher an early script for Mycenaean Greek, a writing system that preceded the Greek alphabet.

Endnotes

1. Michael Smith, *The Emperor's Codes: Bletchley Park and the Breaking of Japan's Secret Ciphers* (Bantam, 2000). For my review, see *Intelligence and National Security*, 16:2 (Summer 2001): 166–7.
2. For a broad intelligence history, see Richard J. Aldrich, *Intelligence and the War against Japan: Britain, America and the Politics of Secret Service* (Cambridge, 2000).
3. For a history of US Army language officers, see James C. McNaughton, *Nisei Linguists: Japanese Americans in the Military Intelligence Service During World War II* (Department of the Army, 2006), which I reviewed for *Studies in Intelligence* 52, no.4 (December 2008). For the US Navy, see Roger Dingman, *Deciphering the Sun: Navy and Marine Corps Codebreakers, Translators, and Interpreters in the Pacific War* (Naval Institute Press, 2009), which I reviewed for *Studies in Intelligence* 54, no. 2 (June 2010).
4. Rikkyo University's Dr. Takeda Kayoko, whose praise for Dr. Kornicki's book is displayed on the rear of his book's dust jacket, covers much the same ground in her own work, *Taiheiyo Senso Nihongo chohosen: Gengokan no katsudo to shiren* [Pacific War, Japanese Intelligence Warfare: Language Officer Activities and Tribulations] (Chikuma Shinsho, 2018).
5. American readers of intelligence history should find refreshing the book's British focus on World War II, in which December 7, 1941, marks not only the Imperial Japanese Navy's raid on Pearl Harbor but the Imperial Japanese Army's landing in Malaya en route to the conquest of Britain's fortress at Singapore.
6. That British instructor was far from the first to note the difficulty of Japanese. Jesuit missionary Lourenço Mexia described in the 16th century the language as "copious," with two alphabets and Chinese "picture-letters" that "are something which one never finishes learning." See Michael Cooper, *They Came to Japan: An Anthology of European Reports on Japan, 1543–1640* (University of California Press, 1965), 176.
7. A senior US naval officer, after determining that a candidate had no knowledge of Japanese and no coursework related to Japan, would still accept him into the language program if he were a member of the elite Phi Beta Kappa student honor society (Dingman, 26). Many of those US Navy recruits were also students of Latin, Greek, and modern European languages. Similarly, recruiters for Britain's Bedford Japanese School favored classicists from Oxford and Cambridge for their general excellence and their particular skill in "decoding" texts (32).
8. The author notes that nearly all the British forces had left Japan by April 1948.

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