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Book Review: On Intelligence: The History of Espionage and the Secret World

Adeyinka Makinde
University of Westminster

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Review of *On Intelligence: The History of Espionage and the Secret World*

John Hughes-Wilson (2016). *On Intelligence: The History of Espionage and the Secret World*, First Edition. London: Constable. ISBN: 978-1-472-11353-5. 528 pages. £25.00

The field of intelligence studies is a relatively new academic discipline that has developed an identifiable intellectual community. It has served as a conduit through which the history of war, the development and decline of empire as well as the calibration of foreign policy have been subjected to fresh formats of inquiry and analysis. The study of the relationship between the practice of intelligence and its impact on state policy in so far as military action is concerned is one, given the repercussions, respectively, of the attack on 9/11 and the decision to go to war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq, that is of particular interest to scholars, policymakers and practitioners of the craft. It is also a subject area of inestimable fascination to a general reading public with a ready appetite for stories on espionage and accustomed to a market in which there has been a surge in the popular history genre. This has meant that studies on the history of military intelligence, as is the case with other genres of history, have been divided into those that fit alternately into the academic and popular writing categories.

John Hughes-Wilson, a retired British Army Intelligence Corps colonel whose career spanned active service in the Falkland Islands and Northern Ireland as well as administrative postings in Whitehall and NATO, is an author whose offerings on military intelligence history fit into the popular writing category. His brief but robust introduction offers no apologies for avoiding "getting completely lost in the thickets of philosophy and Hegelian dialectic" as an academic text might tend to do. Instead, his work adopts a case study approach to explain and analyze the operation of the intelligence apparatus within the context of espionage and the conduct of war.

Before this, he takes the reader through preliminaries: a chapter on a condensed history of the development of what he refers to as the "Second Oldest Profession" from biblical times to the modern era, followed by a brief consolidating chapter stressing the importance of intelligence in national self-defense by references to statements written by Machiavelli and Sun Tzu while at the same time offering words of rebuke for the shortcomings of Clausewitz's 1832 masterwork, *On War*. He provides a lucid overview of the fundamentals of the intelligence cycle, providing admittedly simplified diagrammatic representations of the process, a collection plan as well as an indicator and warning display. These are tools he deploys to function as key reference points for analysis when he explores the different themes which he proceeds to set out. His consideration of HUMINT and the factors typically enabling intelligence agencies to penetrate their competitors is predicated on the traditional MICE acronym: Money, Ideology, Compromise/Coercion and Ego. These factors provide the backdrop to his retellings of major espionage failings and successes of American and British intelligence agencies including that of the Walker family's betrayal of U.S. Navy secrets and Oleg Penkovsky's role in the Cuban Missile Crisis.

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Hughes-Wilson is particularly adept at fleshing out the historical development of SIGNIT and IMINT from the most rudimentary technology to the highly advanced equipment of today. His case study on how signals intelligence was crucial in ensuring the victory of the U.S. Navy over the Imperial Japanese Navy at Midway is particularly gripping. It is also enlightening about the organizational pathologies perpetually at play in contemporary intelligence structures, one aspect of which relates to the vexed question of the ownership of SIGNET: does it reside with the communicators and signalers on the one hand or with the intelligence people?

Hughes-Wilson is an engaging writer who brings the reader inside the mind of the prudent intelligence operative: consistently asking questions and performing an officious bystander test as he sifts through large amounts of information. He is very good at guiding the reader through the practical application of the theories undergirding the intelligence process. This is particularly illuminating in regard to his summation of the severe deficiencies in the American intelligence apparatus in 1941 on the eve of a war that all knew was coming. For it is the case that the problems leading up to Pearl Harbor, including those of over compartmentalization and inter-organizational rivalries, are ones of enduring relevance and bring into focus the need for all-source integration and assessment; an ideal which is difficult to achieve within any national security establishment.

The choice of case studies tailored to fit a particular theme of the intelligence process, whether related to failures or successes, provides the basis for a series of illuminating deconstructions. For instance, the failure of the political leaders of the Soviet Union and Israel to predict the oncoming onslaughts, respectively, of Operation Barbarossa in 1941 and Operation Badr in 1973 was due, Hughes-Wilson argues, not with nonpossession of the correct information predicting enemy intentions but instead centered on the translation of information into intelligence. In the former case, it hinged on a developed organizational culture of only reporting information which the dictator found palatable while the latter was caused by the monopolization of all-source intelligence by Israeli Military Intelligence. On the issue of protecting state secrets, he uses the recent high-profile cases of Bradley Manning, Julian Assange, and Edward Snowden as exemplars explaining the impact of an inadequate security checking mechanism, the increasing difficulty of securing masses of electronically collected data in the high-technology age and the eternal dilemma of balancing national security concerns with that of protecting whistleblowers acting in the public interest. For deception, the Allied planning of the highly risky, but ultimately successful, D-Day landings is used while the area dealing with intelligence fiascos considers the U.S. Special Forces operations in Son Tay, Vietnam and Iran at the time of the hostage crisis. The author also provides an excoriating analysis of the role played by the leaders of the British intelligence community in enabling the administration of Tony Blair to produce a “dodgy dossier” which led the country into a war of dubious legality against Saddam Hussein’s Iraq in 2003.

The issue of intelligence and the challenges posed to national security by terrorism and by cyber warfare are also given consideration by the author. He provides a thoughtful summary on the grievances and “catalysts for conflict” that often form the

backdrop to terror campaigns before focusing on the contemporary security concerns associated with the “War on Terror”. He is adept at summarizing the interrelatedness of cyber war, cyber terrorism, and cybercrime. Here, the threats posed by China, the Russian Federation, and North Korea are pointedly noted as he stresses the complexities associated with tracing the source of attacks and the severe consequences that could impinge on civil and military capacities in the event of an all-out war.

Hughes-Wilson provides a lengthy but highly readable consideration of military intelligence that succeeds in giving the reader a fairly comprehensive overview of the practice of intelligence and security. While it falls short of the rigor expected of an academic text in terms of theoretical detail and the provision of a comprehensive bibliography and citations, it cannot be faulted for being unchallenging or lacking in analytical content. The revolutionizing effect of technological advancement on the gathering, dissemination, and evaluation of intelligence is cogently explained as indeed is the underpinning rationale of his assessment that Julian Assange’s “Wikileaks” project has succeeded in redefining security.

But it does have its shortcomings. For instance, there is no discernible standard regarding the selection or non-inclusion of case studies. Also, given the contemporary prevalence of asymmetric warfare, an examination of the role of intelligence in conflicts between state and nonstate militaries would have been apt. The conflict in 2006 between Israel and the Lebanese militia Hezbollah would have presented an ideal case study. It is clear to military analysts that a series of skillfully planned deceptions and security strategies on the part of Hezbollah provided the means for the militia to withstand the might of the Israeli Defence Force. A thorough consideration of intelligence ought arguably to have included an appraisal of the darker aspects of the use of intelligence gathering in counterinsurgency strategies. U.S. military intelligence covertly orchestrated death squads using a recurring modus operandi to tackle insurgencies in Vietnam, Central America, and Iraq while British army officer Frank Kitson’s concept of “gangs and counter-gangs” was ruthlessly employed in Kenya and Northern Ireland. In a similar vein, the use of anti-Warsaw Pact “stay behind” cells under the command of NATO during the Cold War-era communist containment strategy is not mentioned. Still, as a work which covers a great deal of ground and one that attempts to synthesize a narrative and analysis of the broad aspects of process and organizational efficacy within the political contexts of the day, it is likely to be of interest not only to the connoisseurs of popular history, but also to scholars and practitioners in the field of intelligence.

Adeyinka Makinde
University of Westminster