

SPIES: Duncan Campbell

Sanitised history

BOTH these information-packed books about parts of the intelligence and security world of 40 years ago have deficiencies. Ironically, by firing accurate criticism at Hinsley, Nigel West's account of MI5 during World War Two points out the defects which both books share.

There haven't been many good books about British intelligence activities, and that is the way the authorities like it. The first volume of Hinsley *et al*, covering the period up to summer 1941, came out two years ago. Its publication broke many taboos – like the bar on acknowledging the existence of the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS or MI6) – but one could see at the end how the authors had traded off revelation against obfuscation. No names of officials or agents were given, for instance.

There are yet more damning criticisms of that volume and this one to be made. The late Sir Maurice Oldfield, one of the more able and liberal members of the secret world, was said to have commented on the first, 'A book about committees, written by a committee for committees'. He couldn't have been more right. Administration and the administration of administration are presented as the history of intelligence. Most of the salient detail about intelligence collection is omitted. There is nothing about resources and methods. On occasion a part of the story infuriatingly just vanishes; an organisation is traced for a time and then suddenly and totally disappears for ever.

One of the interesting revelations in Volume Two is about the successful interception of the German intelligence operation's radio signals. A mere half-dozen lines reveal that this operation was in fact conducted by a separate British intelligence organisation not otherwise mentioned in the book. But why did SIS, while fighting for and only just keeping ultimate charge of Bletchley Park (doing most of the code-breaking), want another organisation to take away part of Bletchley's job? Where is the real story of why and how the Chief of SIS – despite the service's record of endless pre-war wolf-calling – remained overlord of the Bletchley Park code-breakers? Not in Hinsley. This is a highly circumscribed and officially sanitised history.

Of course it was an arduous labour and one excuse for the density of Hinsley's prose is that the work required massive condensation of official verbiage. It is a pity, though, that only one of those involved was a professional historian or even an operator in the public domain (Ransom was a career SIS officer and Thomas and Knight both worked in defence intelligence for 30 years or so).

NIGEL West (a pseudonym, as columnists have noted) singles out another criticism of Hinsley – the failure to discuss the Security Service (colloquially known as MI5, not SS!). West, whose book closes in 1945, has demonstrably managed to open the usually vice-like jaws of many former Security

British Intelligence in the Second World

War: Vol. 2 by F.H. HINSLEY, E.E.

THOMAS, C.F.G. RANSOM & R.C. KNIGHT

HMSO £15.95

MI5: British Security Service Operations

1909-1945 by NIGEL WEST Bodley Head

£7.95

Service staff. And yet regrettably, this too is officially sanitised history. The preface records that 'guidance' (i.e. censorship) was received from that dreadful old dying dodo, the D-Notice Committee.

There are no decent contemporary accounts of Britain's security and intelligence agencies. This pair offers only a partial story, terminating in 1945, and, for the rest, there are only the two original accounts of the Philby *et al* affair and numerous recycled versions of the same story. West has re-used a little of the current tale from his own previous collaborative work, *Spy!* – a TV-accompaniment story book. A large part of the tale of the 'Doublecross' system of 'turning' German agents to work for the Allies is not new.

But a good amount here is new, in particular a careful reconstruction of the structure and scope of MI5 about which there has been much previous dissembling.

West takes proper pride in this achievement, providing lists of dozens of MI5 officers' names and thanking all his ex-MI5 sources.

Nevertheless, one can't help wondering what trade-offs have operated here. Sir Vernon Kell, the blimpish former military officer who ran MI5 until his sacking by Churchill in 1940, is rehabilitated a little. Above all, there are no cock-ups, contrivances or corruptions in this quasi-heroic tale of MI5's (undoubted) success in the Second World War and against Comintern, the CP and the IRA.

It is possible to distil from these two accounts a duality of self-serving purpose on the part of the agencies. Firstly, the former intelligence operators of the Forties want their story told before they are in the grave, and official historians with Cabinet Office credentials or sympathetic journalists will do nicely. There is merit in this if it illumines some new corners.

But there is perhaps a deeper and more subtle intent. Seven years ago, as the first news of Ultra code-breaking trickled out, it became clear that a gigantic, then largely unknown post-war intelligence empire had been erected on the secret history of the war.

Hinsley, we are told, shows how 'the decisive weapon of intelligence helped to turn the tide'. Is this history, in fact, a basis for pre-empting any further inquiry into security and intelligence during the war or afterwards? The mythology of security may now be made public in a sanitary way, but heretics are not welcome. □

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