

*The Secret War:  
Spies, Codes and Guerrillas, 1939-45*  
Max Hastings  
William Collins, 2015, £30, h/b

Britain's military record over the past two centuries is pretty patchy overall. She has probably lost more wars than she has won, apart from little ones against poorly armed 'natives' (and she lost quite a few of those), and prevailed in none of the major ones without the help of more powerful allies. She would certainly have been defeated by Germany in 1939-45, for example, had it not been for the vastly superior force – and sacrifice – of the Soviets, and material and military help from the USA. That is partly because she was never a particularly militaristic nation, always rather looking down on those that were. The brightest Britons rarely joined the armed forces, at any level. (Which is not, of course, to detract from the effectiveness of some of them and the bravery of many.) Militarism offended against most of the values her people professed to hold dear, such as individual liberty and enterprise. Which made it difficult when that individual liberty had to be defended by military means, because there was no alternative. And it may also be why it is more comforting to believe, as my immediately post-war British generation did, that 'we' had won the war not through brute force and blind discipline – those 'Prussian' characteristics – but by *outwitting* the militarists; turning our native individualism – even our much mocked eccentricities – against them. It was like David with his clever sling.

The story of Bletchley Park, when it eventually emerged, was part of that. Max Hastings points out in this new book that Britain is the only country to have proudly sponsored an official history of her wartime secret services; and now there's a splendid new museum on the actual site to commemorate this branch of it. (If, that is, you can bear the bit of it that is made up, quite falsely, to replicate the bar in *The Imitation Game*. Hastings thinks that film is 'absurd, as defined by its relationship to fact'.) Bletchley, of course, was where all those 'sallow, tweedy, pipe-smoking' young intellectuals – Alan Turing *et al*: the '*et al*' is important – broke the crucial German 'Enigma' code, and along the way invented (or re-invented) the computer. The claim is often made that they shortened the war by up to two years. Hastings is sceptical of this, though he corroborates the general view of their brilliance.

This stands out particularly by contrast with the stupidity of Britain's main overseas espionage organisation at that time, MI6 (SIS), staffed by 'men of moderate abilities, drawn into the organization by the lure of playing out a pastiche of Kipling's "Great Game", and often after earlier careers as colonial policemen.' This was natural. 'You wouldn't want to suppose, would you', Harry Hinsley – once of Bletchley and later Master of St John's College, Cambridge – asked Hastings, 'that in peacetime the best brains of our society wasted their

lives in intelligence?’ Hugh Trevor-Roper, another brainy historian seconded to intelligence work in the war, memorably compared the old lags in MI6 to a ‘colony of coots in an unventilated backwater of bureaucracy . . . A bunch of dependent bumsuckers held together by neglect, like a cluster of bats in an unswept barn . . . the high priests of an effete religion mumbling their meaningless rituals’; who, obsessed as they were by the ‘Red’ menace in the interwar years, almost totally failed to spot – to put it at its kindest – the threat of Nazism. (Some may not have seen it as a threat.) They were leavened with a few more gifted amateurs during the war, but rarely got along with them. Hastings has few kind words to say for MI6. Unfortunately they were allowed to carry on largely unreformed after the war, partly, Hastings implies, because they were allowed to take the credit for Bletchley’s achievements, in order to keep the very existence of the latter an ‘official secret’ for years to come.

But then, according to this account, which is the first to make extensive comparisons between British and foreign wartime intelligence agencies, most of the latter were scarcely any better. Germany’s Abwehr was ‘incomparably worse’ than any of its rivals, and its chief, Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, not even a competent or consistent traitor, the role for which he is best known. One of Germany’s problems in this field, one it shared with the Soviet Union and Japan, was that her Führer only wanted to hear intelligence that suited his prejudices. Japan and the Soviet Union also suffered from this and it blunted the effects of Stalin’s incomparably better ‘humint’ (human agents) and informer networks – better because of the ideological appeal of communism in the West – together with his paranoid suspicion that Britain was only using the War to turn on the USSR after it was won.

Japanese intelligence was similarly weak, except in China where Japan had been fighting for years; possibly, Hastings suggests, because of the Japanese ‘ingrained sense of cultural superiority’ which led them to underestimate their enemies. The USA secret service learned quickly, after a sluggish beginning, especially its signals interception, but was not as good as it boasted (the FBI claimed to have invented and run the ‘double-cross’ system, which I always understood was a British achievement – insofar as it didn’t go back to Biblical times), and was thought to be porous, because of the openness of American society. It is partly for this reason that MI5, MI6, SOE, the FBI and OSS – the US’s new, swashbuckling foreign intelligence agency – found it difficult to co-operate. Two other reasons were American (especially J Edgar Hoover’s) fierce Anglophobia, which, to be fair, was reciprocated: the (ubiquitous) Trevor-Roper once described his American co-workers as ‘callow, touchy, boastful, flatulent invaders’; and jealousies, animosities and ‘turf wars’ that existed between agencies of the same nation.

In view of all this it may seem surprising that any of the belligerents’ secret intelligence proved of any value at all. Their problems were exacerbated by the difficulties that are intrinsic to humint in particular, which is why Britain

quite rightly trusted more to sigint (signals intelligence) once Enigma was cracked. 'In every neutral capital, intelligence officers puzzled over the perennial enigma of their trade: which side was this or that source really serving?' Hastings suggests that more was learned through ordinary diplomatic contacts in neutral countries: 'probably a good deal of information goes west', wrote MI5's Guy Liddell, 'over the second glass of port'. Espionage attracts liars, obviously, and also some very 'weird' people, which can be confusing. The English are not the only people who produce eccentrics, and Hastings's narrative features dozens; best among them probably the British double – or triple – agent Ronald Seth, aptly codenamed 'Blunderhead', who gets a chapter to himself. Apart from a liar and a fantasist he was – or portrayed himself as – a serial philanderer, justifying this to his SOE handler on the grounds that 'for me "practical love" is a PHYSICAL NECESSITY'. On surviving the war, surprisingly, he went on to become a prolific author of spy and travel books, and – under a pseudonym – of *Sex Manners for Advanced Lovers* (1969), *The Sensuous Couple* (1971) and *Mainly for Wives* (1963). It is characters like this who make the spy genre fun; even Hastings, however, admits that Seth's 'doings did not influence the struggle in the smallest degree', apart from absorbing 'countless man-hours among the senior officers' of both the British and German secret services. But his case does illustrate the virtual impossibility of placing any reliance on spies and informants. Probably half of them were incompetent, or easily captured and shot; or had been 'turned' by the other side in order to deceive their supposed masters; or invented or exaggerated – 'sexed up' – their exploits for kudos or profit (who was to know?); or – in many more cases than it's comfortable to read about – gave in to torture and spilled all. At least Ultra (the machine that cracked Enigma) didn't do that.

Ultra was the undoubted intelligence success story of these years, especially when it came to spotting U-boats threatening Allied convoys; although Hastings also dutifully records its failures, gives credit to its American equivalent, and points out that Germany's Kriegsmarine's B-Dienst wasn't all that far behind. On the British side they were also good at strategic deception – those clever young men again (and a very few women); and at encouraging resistance in occupied countries – at least once it looked like Germany would lose. The Soviet Union was good at infiltration – apparently she still had 97 active agents in Germany in 1944, more than anyone else – and Germany, followed by the Soviets, was tops when it came to spying on their own citizens, as one would expect. Hastings gives us the details. They make a fascinating read, as intelligence history is almost bound to be, with all those 'weird' people involved.

But of course that doesn't necessarily make it important. Hastings tends to play down its material contribution to winning – or losing – the war, though on reading this book one can never be sure. 'Perhaps one-thousandth of 1 per cent of material gathered from secret sources by all the belligerents in World War II contributed to changing battlefield outcomes', he writes; before going

on to say that that 0.001 per cent could be vital. That throws the question up in the air again. We all want to believe the 'two year' claim for Bletchley, but the truth is that we can never know for certain. What Hastings *is* sure about, however, is that intelligence was never a 'magic key', a game-changer on its own, but always required solid force – armies, navies, air forces – to take advantage of it. He makes this point repeatedly. I imagine this is because Hastings was a military historian before he became a secret service one, and so can put the latter into a broader perspective than intelligence historians *pur.* Either that, or he is anxious to restore some of Britain's glory at helping to win the war to the conventional forces that the brilliance of the intellectual achievements of the 'amateur' spooks can tend to put into the shade. In either case, he must be right.

But it doesn't end there. The secret goings-on of the war years had other effects, both positive and negative. At a trivial level, but important to those who participated, they gave them a thrill it was hard to find in any other calling. Many agents joined SOE for the sheer *Boys' Own Paper* adventure that it seemed to promise, or GC&CS (the official acronym for Bletchley Park) simply to indulge their passion for solving puzzles. Afterwards many looked back on their time at Bletchley as 'the most interesting job we've ever had.' These people's lives – even those that their activities brutally shortened – would have been greatly impoverished without these opportunities. In addition, in countries like France and Norway, however 'marginal' the practical contribution of SOE-aided resistance movements may have been, it proved vital after the war – 'beyond price', Hastings calls it – in restoring the national self-respect of defeated and demoralised peoples. To Charles de Gaulle, for example, '*la résistance*' was France. Most of the wartime occupied countries have monuments and museums devoted to their resistance heroes and martyrs today. If myth is as important to a sense of national identity as 'true' history, which it generally is, SOE played a crucial role.

For Britain in her post-war decline – masked early on by her pride in having 'won' the war – the achievements of GC&CS encouraged the David/Goliath trope that was so necessary to *her* national self-regard, showing that British brains and ingenuity – even eccentricity – were superior to Teutonic jackboots any day. Hastings attributes this to Britain's (and the USA's) national 'culture' of 'intellectual honesty', which is something else for us to congratulate ourselves upon. It also helped that Churchill and Roosevelt were more open-minded than Hitler and Stalin. Reinforcing this trope were the exploits of the brave 'few' in the Battle of Britain – 'few' against the Nazi 'hordes' – and the much bruited morale and good humour of the little English people in their slums – 'never mind, dear, put on the kettle and we'll have a nice cup of tea'<sup>1</sup> – under the impact of Blitzkrieg. That's the popular British version. The saturation bombing of Dresden seldom features.

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<sup>1</sup> From *Beyond the Fringe*.

According to the historian of its American side, quoted by Hastings, who also disputes its military effectiveness, the code-breaking episode also represented 'an indisputably brilliant episode in the history of ideas, of intellectuals, and of intelligence', which was to have peaceful repercussions shortly afterwards. That is well known: its contribution to computer science, with 'Colossus', widely regarded as the world's first proper computer, being conceived at Bletchley Park. Unfortunately the authorities' obsession with secrecy led to its being dismantled after the war, though some of its parts found their way to Manchester University's new Computing Machine laboratory, followed by Alan Turing, before the prurient Manchester police hounded him to his shocking death. At that time his contribution to the war was still a state secret.

The cloak of secrecy that blotted out all these achievements for so long afterwards also had repercussions. The reason given for that, of course, was to hide them from the Soviets, Britain's new enemy (as Stalin had predicted, and indeed provoked), even though the Soviets had actually known about Ultra almost from the beginning, through their spies. So that was pretty pointless. Secrecy could also be counter-productive. It left the way open for the most unreliable versions of events to surface in public without contradiction: much of it mere 'romantic twaddle', and self-serving lies. The official history, published from 1979 onwards, was supposed to correct this; but as all the volumes were penned by 'trusties', and vetted, it didn't convince everyone. (That was unfair; it seems reliable as far as it goes.)

Secrecy also wasn't good for the agencies themselves. 'The record suggests', writes Hastings, 'that official secrecy does more to protect intelligence agencies from domestic accountability for their own follies than to shield them from enemy penetration.' (Despite this, he can't resist a stab at whistle-blower Edward Snowden at the end.) Even the very existence of GCHQ and MI6 was supposed to be secret, never to be even whispered in parliament, for example, until 1994. That made them effectively unaccountable – to the democracy, at any rate – and gave them a thick veil behind which they could simply carry on as before, as inefficient and perhaps corrupt as the new boys like Trevor-Roper had found them when they had joined. When the bright amateurs returned to their professorships, and despite MI6's no longer being able to 'wax fat on the achievements of the code-breakers', little seems to have been done to reform them. Stella Rimington's recollections of the lazy old blimps she found manning MI5 when she first joined it in the 1970s (she later of course became its Director-General) match up pretty well with Trevor-Roper's picture of MI6 in the 1940s. Hence the scandals and suspicions of scandals – 'conspiracy theories' – that plagued them in the inter-war years, from the 'Cambridge Five' fiasco to the alleged 'Wilson Plot'. One hopes they've learned their lesson by now. Our lives may depend upon it.

Secrecy is also, of course, the enemy of the historian. It is especially problematic in this field because of the culture of deception that was intrinsic

to it – indeed, a professional necessity. New recruits to the secret services were asked on interview whether they had any moral objection to lying, to which the correct answer – the one that would get them in – was the opposite to what would be expected in most other professions. So, as Hastings rightly cautions at the beginning of his ‘Sources’ section, ‘it deserves renewed emphasis that scepticism is essential about all accounts related to intelligence in every nation, and thus to the memoirs of agents, official reports, published history and even contemporary documents’. That covers not only the celebratory but also the critical accounts of wartime intelligence that Hastings has drawn on here – like Trevor-Roper’s mockeries, perhaps. Nothing is certain in this area. But Hastings has done a great job of applying a military historian’s mind to the *uncertainties* of what used to be called – before it became worked over so thoroughly – the ‘missing dimension’ of the history of World War II.

*Bernard Porter*

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Spies devoted as much time to avoiding detection and staying alive as they did to obtaining information. When such agents did manage to pass on potentially valuable intelligence, it was often ignored. At the same time, agencies tended to overvalue the spies they had recruited and trained. One academic conscripted into Britain's wartime secret service concluded that MI6 "values information in proportion to its secrecy, not its accuracy. They would attach more value . . . to a scrap of third-rate and tendentious misinformation smuggled out of Sofia in the fly-buttons of a vagabond Rumanian pimp"

"The Secret War 1939-45" examines that other war waged by British, American, German, Russian and Japanese intelligence-gathering personnel. Moving chronologically through the conflict, Max Hastings charts the successes and failures of allied and axis forces, espionage and counterespionage. Observing how the evolution of electronic communications dramatically increased the possibilities and significance of these secret battles, this is the story of intelligence beyond Bletchley to the FBI, Russia and the spies of axis dictatorships. For the first time since his best-selling "All Hell Let Loose"

Much has been written about the soldiers, sailors and airmen but this is the first book to examine the successes and failures of the secret war from the perspective of all combatants. Like his earlier books, it draws upon original research " particularly from Russia " and will range over an international canvas, combining strategic analysis with startling individual stories of daring, deception and hardship. [Twitter](#) [Facebook](#) [LinkedIn](#). [Related books](#). [The Secret War](#).