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Review by Daniel Larsen, University of Cambridge

Richard Dunley significantly expands our understanding of British intelligence in its founding era in this meticulously researched article. Intelligence studies as a subdiscipline is significantly underdeveloped in any era prior to the Second World War, and that is certainly very much the case for British intelligence in the run-up to 1914. Only around a half-dozen books or articles provide any meaningful coverage of the topic. Almost all of those works focus exclusively or predominantly on the 1909 founding of the Secret Service Bureau (SSB), and for good reason: the present British Security Service (also known as MI-5) and the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS or MI-6) trace their origins to the immediate split of the SSB into domestic and foreign sections. Though rudimentary, other British intelligence capabilities nevertheless existed before the First World War—yet the only scholarship focusing primarily on them consists entirely of Matthew Seligmann’s excellent 2006 book on the activities of British military and naval attachés.¹

With this article, Dunley continues Seligmann’s foray into pre-1914 non-SSB British intelligence efforts by revealing a heretofore unknown British consular intelligence service. Beginning in 1906 and largely spearheaded by First Sea Lord John Fisher, this purpose-built though relatively informal network of consular officials steadily collected information on German naval activities. These officials sent to London a steady stream both of what today would be called open-source intelligence as well as of intelligence of a more confidential nature. The network focused on four principal areas of collection: naval movements, warship construction and trials, docks and port facilities, and coastal defences.

Studies of British intelligence in the First World War era are bedevilled by the fact so little documentary evidence about the topic survives in British archives. Reconstructing these intelligence activities often tends to be a matter of painstakingly assembling small clues scattered amongst large volumes of other archival material.

This is very much the case here. The main bodies of consular records that would explain precisely what kinds of intelligence activities the consuls carried out regrettably have been destroyed—leaving Dunley with an exceptionally difficult task. He rises to the challenge most impressively. Drawing on extensive research in British archives in addition to tracking down a set of important family papers, Dunley has uncovered those clues that are to be found and has subjected them to rigorous analysis. Despite the relative lack of source material, Dunley’s excellent scholarship leaves us with an admirably clear picture of this consular intelligence service’s origins, capabilities, collection, and personnel.

A common temptation in intelligence studies is to overestimate the impact of intelligence on policymakers, but Dunley is admirably conservative on this front. Beyond claiming that the consuls gave basic information that, in a general sense, “provided the vital grounding of the decision-making process,” his principal case for any direct impact of this intelligence lies in its helping to convince British officials of the strength of German coastal defences. He notes how the Admiralty repeatedly considered the practicality of littoral operations against Germany in the event of war and reasonably concludes that the information offered by the consuls was central in dissuading them.

Indeed, perhaps the only criticism to be had of Dunley’s article is that his findings are even more significant than he gives himself credit for. Beyond the limited importance of the intelligence service with respect to Admiralty decision-making, his case for the wider import of his research rests largely on its fleshing out our understanding of the structure and capabilities of British intelligence in the pre-war period.

This it does, and very well. Though apparently not quite realizing it, however, Dunley has also provided the only existing study on the modern origins of what subsequently would be called ‘diplomatic cover’ for intelligence officials. The most fascinating element of his research is the conflict he shows both within the Foreign Office and between the Foreign Office and the Admiralty over the practicality and propriety of involving diplomatic officials in intelligence activities. A number of key British Foreign Office officials, led by permanent undersecretary Charles Hardinge, strongly resisted many aspects of the Admiralty’s push for tasking consuls with intelligence collection duties. Especially, they resisted the appointment of ‘consular’ officials whose primary duties would not be consular at all. (The views of the Foreign Secretary himself, Sir Edward Grey, however, are unclear—but one scrap of evidence of his attitude survives, which is when he overrode the objections of his subordinates to the Admiralty’s plans in 1906, asserting that the naval information to be gathered by the consuls was essential.)

The conflict between the Foreign Office and the Admiralty in this period provides a contrast with the interwar period, where a standard practice of designating SIS personnel as “Passport Control Officers” existed within British diplomatic outposts. Indeed, today the protection provided by diplomatic postings is regarded as being at the core of human intelligence collection, in sharp contrast to the far riskier sending out of individuals under non-official cover (NOCs). No previous intelligence scholar has paused to consider how the now-commonplace practice of protecting intelligence collection with diplomatic immunity arose in the modern period, a subject upon which Dunley sheds considerable light.

Closely related to the more general issue of the origins of diplomatic cover, this Foreign Office resistance to providing diplomatic protection for intelligence work illuminates something important about the cultural expectations underlying the conduct of British diplomacy in this period. Even junior Foreign Office officials who were more supportive of consular intelligence collection tried to draw a careful, if fuzzy, distinction between impermissible “spying” and unobjectionably “show[ing] considerable zeal and power of observation”
while carrying out normal consular activities. As the foreign section of the SSB became operational in the years after 1909, the Foreign Office intensely desired that it should take over intelligence collection, with a minimum of Foreign Office involvement. Indeed, in one instance, it even insisted that a consul working for the SSB either quit either his intelligence work or resign his consulship—as clear an example as any of the Foreign Office rejecting the notion of diplomatic cover for intelligence gathering as a practice compatible with the conduct of British diplomacy in this period. What was it about British diplomats’ cultural notions about how diplomacy was to be carried out that rendered intelligence activities so objectionable—objections that the First World War permanently swept aside? Dunley alludes indirectly to these issues and tensions in titling his article “Not Intended to Act as Spies,” and his tracing of the details of the bureaucratic conflict is impressive, but greater reflection on the wider historical implications might have further broadened the article’s claims considerably.

Overall, Dunley has meaningfully advanced our knowledge of the structures and capabilities of British intelligence in its founding area. His article shows the importance of looking beyond the direct predecessors to Britain’s current main intelligence organs and demonstrates the potential for further work to be done in order to complete our understanding in this area. With the first-rate skill and care with which this superb piece of research has been assembled, Dunley has shown us precisely how it can and should be done.

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