

Agents are Forever: Intelligence and Counter-Intelligence Pertaining to the Western Front, North Sea, and Britain During the First World War

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Abstract

The historiography on intelligence during the First World War currently lacks sufficient detail. Historian John Keegan in *The First World War* concluded that length of the war was dependent upon outdated tactics with modern technology. This paper argues British intelligence and counter-intelligence had been vital, but failed to shorten the war until properly implemented. Military commanders, due to their own arrogance, failed to implement intelligence that could have shortened the war, amounting to fewer casualties. Historians such as Alan Judd, Michael Occleshaw, Christopher Andrew, and Paul Gannon graze this issue, but discussion is scant. This research argues that the arrogance of British commanders resulted in a conflict that was longer than necessary, given correct intelligence on German divisions. Meaningful results were achieved only when British commanders adopted strategies suited to the intelligence.

Keywords: World War One, Intelligence, Great Britain

1. Introduction:

Nigel de Grey entered the office of Naval Intelligence Director William Hall on 17 January 1917, carrying what would later be known as the Zimmermann Telegram, and asked, “Do you want to bring America into the war, sir?”¹ Room 40, the intelligence department of the Royal Navy, had cracked the German naval code system. The efforts of Room 40 were synonymous with British success in developing an intelligence advantage during the First World War. As technology outpaced the outdated tactics of the First World War, casualties would be high. Nevertheless, had the vital advantage of intelligence reports been implemented successfully, a war of shortened length with fewer total casualties would have been likely. However, arrogance among the British High Command resulted in opposition to intelligence departments.

The following examination of British intelligence and counter-intelligence is structured into three main areas: first, the prewar period; next, three case-studies of intelligence and counter-intelligence departments: the intelligence along the Western Front in Belgium, the North Sea, and counter-intelligence in Britain; and finally, an analysis of British military commanders’ failure to implement correct and vital intelligence reports.

2. Decentralizing Intelligence Departments in the Prewar Period:

Before 1914 the British military understood more effective intelligence departments were needed. Dismal intelligence efforts by the British military during the Boer War are cited by historians as the prime reason an

improved system was needed. During the Boer War, British intelligence failed because strength and intent of enemy movements went unnoticed, or were miserably taken note of, by intelligence gathers. Weak intelligence on troop movement and strength could not be tolerated in event of European conflict. Britain learned from the mistakes made during the Boer War, and strengthened their intelligence capabilities during the years leading up to the Great War. The perception of growing European threats was not random; Germany was the principle target of British fears due to their exploitation of weak French intelligence efforts as revealed by Colonel James Edmonds in a memorandum from 1909 titled “Espionage in Time of Peace”:

The rapid initial successes of the Germans were largely due to the valuable information provided by their agents in France and to the French having no organized system to detect and detain these agents at the critical moment. The French commanders were ordered to organize a system on the 16th of July, it was then too late.²

Germany’s growth in military power, both on land and at sea, became a growing menace to the security of the British Empire, even to the extent that Britain feared the threat of invasion.³

While the British High Command understood the need for updated intelligence departments, a strong overriding opposition existed towards espionage. Espionage was seen as a non-British, lowly course of work, neither honorable nor courageous. Espionage was not befitting of the British patriot and was looked down upon by an officer class strongly composed of the gentry. As a result, Britain relied on foreign agents with no direct tie to Britain, while the Directors came from the British military.⁴

Despite Britain having initially fallen behind other European powers intelligence departments, by 1909 their intelligence efforts had made positive strides. The independent Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) was one half of the Secret Service Bureau (SSB) which contained the domestic counterintelligence department later to be known as Military Operations Section Five (MO5). The establishment of the SIS filled the void of what historian Philip Davies terms, “offensive intelligence collection,” as an address not affiliated with the British War Office, which in theory, aroused little suspicion. Despite these efforts safety was still not at hand as counterintelligence efforts must be ready to repel the fear of German invasion.⁵

3. Establishing Counter-Intelligence from Spy Mania:

The growth of the German military was revealed in the popular early spy novels whose authors filled the reader’s mind with paranoia and suspicion. Historians point to two novels to highlight the danger Britain was in as William Le Queux’s *Spies of the Kaiser Plotting the Downfall of England* and Erskine Childers’s *Riddle of the Sands* captured the atmosphere of fear. Paranoia swept through Britain and resulted in two conclusions: Britain was unprepared to counter German espionage, and massive rearmament must be undertaken.⁶

Le Queux, when talking about *Spies of the Kaiser*, said, “No sane person can deny that England is in grave danger of invasion by Germany at a date not far distant.”⁷ Le Queux fed and exacerbated the paranoia at hand. Britain though knew Germany had proven before to infiltrate unprepared countries. Britain held no exception to the German method towards France detailed in the “Espionage in Time of Peace.”⁸ Aliens, particularly German aliens, in Britain became the feared menace, and action was taken so these aliens would not cause the fall of Britain. Reorganizing and strengthening the counterintelligence department was needed.

The domestic portion of the SSB addressed the reports and fears to quell the hysteria, but the hysteria was uncontrollable. As a result, the SSB used the reports to strengthen identification practices to dismantle spy operations when the time came. In an act of foresight, Britain withheld dismantling the small prewar espionage system which had found root in Britain. Instead, Britain waited and struck against German espionage at the opportune moment.⁹

The mentality of falling behind during the prewar period for British intelligence is important to understanding British intelligence efforts prior to war. Without the prewar efforts, British intelligence would not have been as strong as it proved. The mentality of falling behind Germany and the loss of hegemony propelled Britain to not seek status-quo, but change intelligence and counterintelligence systems to fit the new threat.

4. *La Dame Blanche* and Western Front Intelligence:

Many British citizens believed the very nature of espionage as lowly gutter-work. The image of espionage therefore is not what the SIS felt was necessary for the next war and resulted in a lexicon change showing Germans as “spies” but the British as “agents”. The negative lexicon was ingrained in the minds of the British command, however, and served as a hindrance to intelligence implementation. It was a part of warfare, but not one fit for British subjects. This negative and ingrained belief of the deplorable nature of espionage resulted in the British High Command believing very little in intelligence capabilities.¹⁰

Enlistment in the SIS was not common and initial intelligence gathering was dealt with by scouting branches of the military; however, even the traditional scouting branches of the British Expeditionary Force were not believed by the British High Command, a common recurrence in the First World War. The reliance on patrols slowly dwindled as the low reward but high risk became prevalent in soldiers’ minds.¹¹ As a result the SIS, later MO1c, became the method for gathering intelligence.

Beyond the front lines is where intelligence was most concerned with as war fell into stalemate. The area behind the front lines held the stockpile of intelligence, as it was there where the movement was occurring. Intelligence in the First World War wanted to reproduce the enemies’ Order of Battle, the manual which composed all the divisions and battalions of the army and where situated, along with information on reserve lines, supply levels, and frequency of leave for soldiers.¹² Under Mansfield Cumming, the SIS established their stronghold where Germany had acquired countless enemies and where plenty of volunteers lived: Belgium, which was stationed as the moving ground for the German military.

Cumming employed upper echelon British men to run divisions or sections, forming an elaborate and tiered organization as they employed their own agents, who in turn employed their own agents. The system became a pyramid growing in complication. Cumming’s system provided an effective and reliable network which would not crumble should one link fall. The coded intelligence reports moved up the branches finally reaching Cumming, who could then inform his superiors of German intent. Despite the method requiring intelligence reports to travel for days, Henry Landau, the organizer of the *La Dame Blanche* network, showed time was not a crucial factor as German activity required weeks of planning and preparation.¹³

The SIS intelligence was concerned with understanding German train lines and became paramount to success. Alan Judd, a historian who wrote on Cumming and the British Secret Service, said:

Train-watching was already established as a major source of information about the deployment of the German army in the field. The army’s dependence on the railways for movement and reinforcement meant that the monitoring of troop trains yielded intelligence about everything.¹⁴

German railways ran through Belgium to the Western Front, and the reliance on railways proved disastrous for Germany. While money provide incentive for many of the agents of Britain, the Belgian citizen acted not out of greed, but patriotic duty, retribution, self-preservation, and ending German occupancy. The result was a twenty-four hour job for the families who aided Britain, and the family hid and masked intelligence efforts under German occupancy. Female agents, often mothers and daughters, aroused little suspicion from Germans, as women clearly did not belong in war and were overlooked. Once *La Dame Blanche* began operation ceaseless stream of intelligence was brought to Britain for implementation until the war ended.¹⁵

Train movements were the crucial part of intelligence on the Western Front, since movements dictated and foretold future German military operations. Germany could not sustain large attacks on both fronts, and a shift in a large number of trains signified a military operation. *La Dame Blanche* charted all German movement, and as Landau wrote, the growth of *La Dame Blanche* was comparable to “a giant octopus . . . spreading its tentacles over the whole of the occupied territory.”¹⁶ The information was important, vital, and a success as Judd wrote:

It was due largely to *La Dame Blanche* reporting that, by the end of the war, the [General Headquarters’] Brown Book was able to show the composition of every German Division.¹⁷

The Western Front was not the only area looked to by British intelligence: the North Sea and the threat of the German Fleet proved a looming threat.

5. Room 40 and The North Sea:

The British Admiralty faced a growing threat from the German fleet, and British mastery of the seas was key to defeating Germany. The job was given to the Naval Intelligence Division (NID) to procure the information needed for success. The Royal Navy dealt a significant blow to Germany at the outset of war by sending a cable ship to sever the German cable lines. Such action stifled Germany for the duration as reliance on neutral cables running through Britain became tapped. This was insurmountable as Germany was unable to transmit messages without Britain knowing, and vital information on German fleet locations and the economic state was gained once the naval code was broken.¹⁸

Room 40, the prime intelligence department of the NID, was originally run by Henry Oliver, but Alfred Ewing quickly took indirect control by employing the men needed to decipher the codes. Before Ewing, Oliver dealt with messages alone and quickly sought to expand, allowing Ewing more opportunities. Those employed by Ewing were not the upper echelon of British society, but educated men of the non-elite British society. Room 40 could not succeed by sheer amateur codebreakers alone; information came in more rapidly than could be deciphered while the code was not yet fully broken. The subsequent acquisition of the German naval code books was more luck and German blunder than British brilliance. The Royal Australian Navy acquired the first of three code books from a German-Australian and rightly confiscated the code book. When the Russian fleet engaged *Magdeburg*, a German cruiser, the Russians acquired the second code book from a floating German sailor and passed the book on to Britain. The third code book was acquired from the wreckage of a German destroyer by a fishing ship. For the remainder of the war, the German fleet was unable to keep secrecy in communications, and failure to adopt a new code weakened the German naval campaign.¹⁹

Despite the acquisition and intelligence, tension arose between the NID and Admiralty due the unprofessional linguistic reports not achieving Admiralty standards. The NID began to offer explanation with what was presented in reports, but as historian Paul Gannon wrote, "It took naval experience and intuition to work out what a set of messages might imply."²⁰ Implementation and knowing what a message said was only gained through military experience. This resulted in the Admiralty disregarding intelligence reports, and adopting their personal naval intuition and uninformed beliefs.

The goal of the Royal Navy had been to prevent German success in the North Sea and ultimately war by blockade. The information from Room 40 was effective, as adaptations could be made to strengthen the blockade when needed. Eventually it expanded to other Axis powers to halt trade.²¹ The blockade effectively starved the German people into submission over time, as designed.²²

The German fleet began to heavily rely upon the submarine to destroy the British spirit, as their surface fleet could not hold their own against the Royal Navy. The German High Command initiated unrestricted submarine warfare in hope of bringing Britain to their knees, or at minimum weakening the blockade.²³ The sinking of the *Lusitania* in 1915 showed the desperation early on of German action; however, the sinking did not immediately bring the United States of America into the war.²⁴

The NID and Room 40 had not acquired the diplomatic code through the captured naval code books, but in time a double agent delivered the diplomatic code piece by piece.²⁵ This code revealed its importance in 1917 when codebreakers picked up a telegram from a tapped neutral cable bound for Mexico:

We intend to begin on the first of February unrestricted submarine warfare. We shall endeavour in spite of this to keep the U.S.A. neutral . . . MAKE WAR TOGETHER MAKE PEACE TOGETHER Generous financial support and an understanding on our part that Mexico is to reconquer the lost territory in Texas, New Mexico and Arizona.²⁶

The threat of the German submarine campaign was a nuisance, but was unable to break the blockade, cease trade to Britain, or withhold fresh American troops which tilted the war onto the Allied side. A domestic threat still existed at the declaration of war: MO5 saw that no German spy would be successful in their mission.

6. German Espionage and MO5:

The prewar spy mania has created an effective weapon to use against German espionage on the British home-front. The Aliens Restriction Act (ARA) and the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) addressed and dealt with the rampant fear in Britain, lowered the rights of aliens, especially German aliens, in Britain and, formed the groundwork for MO5 to target key threats to British security observed before the war broke out.²⁷

MO5's greatest day during the First World War came on the day war was declared as the department wasted little time in arresting every actual German spy identified before war broke out, silencing intelligence reports for the German Army. Initially German spies had been given directions to acquire information about the British Navy, and with the spies removed the German effort was weakened beyond repair. The early actions of MO5 allowed the BEF to land without the location known by the German army, thus providing fewer casualties than if the landing had been pinpointed.²⁸

MO5 never had as great a success as the initial spy round-up, but it did protect Britain from future German espionage activity. Perhaps MO5's greatest tool against German espionage was the publicized executions of German spies, which caused fear among potential recruits for German espionage. The German Great General Staff found it painfully clear through repeated outcomes that establishment of a permanent spy ring in Britain was unlikely, and the cost-benefit ratio unfavorable. MO5 took matters one step further and kept some executions secret. MO5 responded to German requests with false information to create confusion among the German Command, and further deepened the catalogue of knowledge at MO5 for later destruction of spy rings.²⁹

The German espionage system was plagued with blunders, and they never learned from their mistakes. While MO5 did not arrest every German spy in Britain, it mattered little as the spies posed weak threats to Britain.³⁰ The domestic efforts of the counterintelligence branch MO5 destroyed the German threat by 1916, but even with successful and vital intelligence reports along the Western Front and North Sea, the war continued. British commanders were not listening to the intelligence departments out of their own arrogance.

7. The British High Command's Failure to Heed Intelligence Reports:

The arrogance of the British upper class is found in all branches of the British High Command, army and navy. In a memorandum written 5 May 1919 Lieutenant Colonel R.J. Drake, an organizer of MO5, wrote: "throughout this period there is no doubt the general average of the value and accuracy of the information received showed a progressive upward tendency."³¹ Intelligence reports had steadily increased in accuracy and importance; however, the British High Command failed to implement the intelligence successfully until the adoption of attrition in 1917. Field commanders, as well as the Admiralty, wanted the single-decisive battle to win the war, which led them to disregard intelligence reports in order to achieve their own strategy.³² This attitude squandered their advantage in intelligence for much of the war. *Sir Douglas Haig's Despatches* showed the ingrained belief among commanders that the outdated tactics were still suited for trench fighting despite the catastrophic results that could have been lessened, if not prevented, by proper intelligence implementation.³³ Despite such questions, scant discussion is given on why such refusal of the intelligence reports existed though among the historiography of intelligence in the First World War.

James Marshall-Cornwall, a British officer during the First World War, said about General John Charteris:

When I produced the documentary evidence that these three divisions had arrived, Charteris said "This is a bluff on the part of the Germans to try and put us off attacking, and as I have already informed the Commander-in-Chief that there are no reserves behind the German front I do not propose to upset his morale by giving him this information. You are not to put these divisions on the intelligence map."³⁴

The British High Command believed, had intelligence reports been used, soldiers' morale would be jeopardized because of increases in enemy position, but still deemed it wise to follow the plans of attack. The result was generations of men lost to pointless attacks before a different strategy was devised.

The adoption of attrition in 1917 aimed for continual strain on the German military. The process was a slow strangulation of the German war effort which had to meet new demands on a continual basis to maintain strength. Before attrition, the single decisive battle was the goal of every general, but the nature of modern warfare required

different strategy; in addition, the commanders ignored what intelligence reports told them about German lines before finally adopting a new strategy after three years of trench warfare. The intelligence, originally, was misused to fit outdated mindsets. Instead what the intelligence reports showed was small, yet highly obtainable goals producing positive results.³⁵

Haig spent much of the time praising the British commanders and generals for their loyalty and determination as well as praising the British infantry; while additionally ignoring the efforts made by MO1c and the Belgian train-watchers who had charted every German position by the end of the war.³⁶ For Haig it was the British infantryman and the loyal commander who continued to press on in the ordeal of trench warfare. The efforts of MO1c were perceived to be lesser due to the arrogance inherent in the hierarchal society imposed on generals by British society.

8. Arrogance of the British Admiralty:

The British officer class among the Royal navy can be exemplified through Alexander Scrimgeour, who was an upper class officer raised from an early age in the traditional ideas of warfare: victory through decisive battles. Scrimgeour's attitudes were similar across the Admiralty. Officers came from the upper class of British society who felt their own judgments were supreme. Much of Scrimgeour's diary is filled with talk on daily duty, letters home for personal items, and falling in love. As ordinary soldiers fought and died, members of the British High Command enjoyed the luxuries of love and dancing, continued to disregard intelligence reports from the very intelligence agencies created to provide intelligence, maintained arrogant beliefs to those of lower social status. Two naval battles exemplified the inability of the British High Command to adhere to intelligence properly.³⁷

After learning of a planned German ambush near Dogger Bank, the Admiralty devised a counter ambush in what became known the Battle of Dogger Bank 24 January 1915. Admiral David Beatty's fleet was unable to capitalize on the surprise, however, and chose to cease pursuit of the severely weakened Germany Fleet due to submarines in the area. Despite Admiral Beatty's belief, the documents show no submarines were in the area of Dogger Bank. Oliver, still technically head of Room 40 but soon to be promoted, chose to pass an incomplete intelligence report leaving key information out to the British Admiralty. As a result, the linguistics of the report was not on par with British Admiralty standards. Oliver acted against Room 40's efforts resulting in distrust of the ability to provide correct intelligence reports, and this created further inability for Room 40 to be taken seriously and used effectively.³⁸

No mention exists of the fault of acquiring complete and full reports by Room 40 is found in Admiral Beatty's papers. The lack of information illustrates, in Admiral Beatty's outlook, it was not his fault the Battle of Dogger Bank was not more decisive. This highlights the arrogance of the Admiralty seeing it is a problem of the lower class codebreakers; instead it had been a fault of the Admiralty.³⁹ Beatty protected his own image rather than addressing the breakdown of communication by Oliver.

The Battle of Jutland, 31 May to 1 June 1916, had a similar breakdown of communication resulting from the arrogance of the Admiralty intuition. Room 40 discovered the whole Germany Fleet was sailing into the North Sea, and Admiral Beatty and Admiral John Rushworth Jellicoe's fleets had the opportunity to incapacitate the whole German Fleet. Room 40 was only asked if the intercepted signal came from a harbor station; not if the fleet had set sail thus switching to a different code signal. Room 40 answered what had been asked instead of providing their informed judgment as the NID had been distrusted in providing operational intelligence. The Admiralty, through their arrogance of their own ability and intuition, had grown to distrust Room 40 and disbelieve any information that had not been asked for. As a result, Admiral Beatty sailed towards the whole German Fleet as Admiral Jellicoe decreased speed to save fuel believing the German Fleet had not sailed.⁴⁰

An analysis of what was written after the battle should be focused on by historians, not whether the result was deemed a victory or not. What was written after the Battle of Jutland revealed the Admiralty's concern with pushing the blame onto lesser officers. Admiral Beatty and Admiral Jellicoe were quick to blame others in their protection.⁴¹ The only intelligence mention is the indirect blame to Room 40, which created more distrust in the ability of Room 40 to provide meaningful and correct intelligence.⁴²

In a press cutting by the *Daily Mail* after the armistice was declared, an article on 28 October 1920 called "The Jutland Hush-Up" revealed:

The Admiralty is still trying to hide the truth about the Battle of Jutland. The Navy and the nation have long wanted to know why Lord Jellicoe, with an overwhelming British battle-fleet, turned away from a beaten German fleet of half his strength and allowed it to escape . . . He thereby prolonged the war by two years and rendered the deadly submarine campaign possible.⁴³

The Admiralty protected Admiral Jellicoe because of the hierarchy of society. Intelligence was gathered by members of lower social classes, who were not raised in military culture. As a result, the commanders, who came from the upper classes, did not feel they could make judgments on military operations.

9. Conclusion:

The current discussion of why the intelligence advantage Britain acquired during the First World War is insufficient. Arrogance inherent in the British High Command resulted in a failure to implement the correct intelligence resulting in an unnecessarily long war. Sidney Felstead wrote: "If this little book is not written in vain it will make people realize that there are others who have a claim to the gratitude of the nation."⁴⁴ This paper is offered in the same hope that proper recognition will be given to those who risked their lives to bring an end to First World War through intelligence gathering.

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