Introduction

In the autumn of 1980 General Sir James Marshall-Cornwall re-visited the Western Front accompanied by a Guardian journalist.\(^1\) The 93-year-old former intelligence officer explained how, during the First World War, ‘reports which gave accurate assessments of German strengths were withheld from the British commander-in-chief’. Supposedly Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig was kept in ignorance of the situation through a deliberate policy of concealment carried out by his chief of intelligence, Brigadier-General John Charteris.\(^2\) Marshall-Cornwall claimed that Charteris had told him that he ‘believed it to be his duty to keep up the morale of the commander-in-chief and that if he gave him too much depressing intelligence Haig might lose his determination to win the war’. The Guardian claimed that these revelations were being made ‘for the first time’, but this was certainly not their first airing. Indeed, through Marshall-Cornwall’s longevity and advocacy, they had become a feature of the debate surrounding Haig’s conduct of operations. This subject has always been controversial in both military and British history, not least because of the half million troops killed during his command of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in France and Belgium.\(^3\)

Marshall-Cornwall was a very credible witness, especially in regard to intelligence matters. A talented linguist and regular artillery officer, he had joined the newly formed Intelligence Corps in August 1914. Promoted to become an intelligence staff officer (Fig. 0.1), by 1918 he was a Lieutenant-Colonel in the War Office. In the interwar period he served in a variety of

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2 A contemporaneous style guide suggested that Charteris could be pronounced as either ‘Charters’ or ‘Char’teris’. It is clear that John Charteris used the former, as oral testimony refers to him as ‘General Charters’; Who’s Who Yearbook 1914–15 (London: Adams & Charles Black, 1914), 72; ‘Dictation’, 8 March 1935, Nolan Papers, US Army Military History Institute (USAMHI).
3 Haig assumed command on 19 December 1915. The official number of deaths in the BEF between January 1916 and November 1918 was 484,011. This includes those who died of wounds or disease but not the missing; War Office, Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire during the Great War, 1914–1920 (March 1922), 256–71.
intelligence and mainstream posts before becoming a corps commander after Dunkirk. Later in the Second World War he became Assistant Chief of the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS). After retirement he wrote military histories including *Haig as a Military Commander*, gave oral history interviews and published his memoirs. An early example of his influence can be seen in a revisionist Haig biography by John Terraine. He cited a

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1960 conversation in which Marshall-Cornwall had told him that, in assessing the state of the German army, Charteris ‘considered that it was his duty to keep up Douglas Haig’s morale’.6 Twenty years later, Marshall-Cornwall told Michael Occleshaw, who was researching British military intelligence in the First World War, that Charteris ‘had an almost mesmeric effect on Haig’ and that he ‘became a slave to Charteris’ influence’.7

This portrayal of a malign intelligence officer deluding the unsuspecting commander-in-chief has a long pedigree. Its roots lie in the circumstances of Charteris’ removal from intelligence work at the end of 1917. At the time David Lloyd George expressed the view that ‘Charteris’ views have been wrong and that he has done much harm by disseminating unduly optimistic opinions and prognostications’.8 In his memoirs the former Prime Minister renewed the attack; the index entries ‘misleads Haig’ and ‘“cooks” the reports for Haig’ provide a succinct summation.9 This view of Charteris gained traction and became something of an orthodoxy. It was seductive partly because it could be deployed by both Haig’s critics and defenders. For the former, the commander-in-chief was guilty of over-promoting a sycophantic subordinate, while for the latter any misreading of the military situation in 1916 or 1917 could be explained away. Marshall-Cornwall was a staunch defender and his biography pulled no punches.10 Again, the index provides a quick précis: Charteris’ misleading of Haig regarding ‘decline in German reserves and morale’, the ‘quality of German troops’, the ‘strength of German reserves at Cambrai’ and that, even in 1918, Haig was ‘still influenced by [his] optimism’. This lead has been followed by others.11 But perhaps the most extreme manifestation is a photograph caption in a populist

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intelligence biography, which pointed to ‘John Charteris ... who manipulated intelligence estimates, resulting in the deaths of a generation of young Britons’.12 A more nuanced, but still unfavourable, interpretation has also emerged. In lieu of the ‘legend’ of the ‘evil counsellor’,13 it depicts Charteris as a fellow traveller with Haig on the path of unbridled optimism.14 This was not new; in 1926 one of Haig’s former army commanders told the official historian that, as early as 1915, ‘Haig’s optimism ... obscured his judgement and led to heavy casualties in attempts to advance and decisively defeat the German army, with insufficient means. His intelligence, under Charteris, “played up” to this optimism.’15 Further along this spectrum are those who are sceptical about Charteris wielding any real influence over Haig. As long ago as 1970 Major-General Sir Kenneth Strong, the distinguished Second World War intelligence officer, surveyed the available evidence. He suggested that the relationship might be more complicated and that Haig’s world-view might have been determined in spite of, rather than because of, the intelligence presented to him.16 Similarly, Gerard De Groot, in his Haig biography, argued that ‘Charteris was not the well from which Haig’s optimism flowed’.17 This position has been adopted by others.18 However, in the absence of a thorough examination, the point has been more speculative than conclusive.

There is no doubt that Marshall-Cornwall’s interpretation of events was honestly held, but his influence upon the literature is a cautionary

15 Gough to Edmonds, 12 July 1926, CAB45/120, The National Archives (TNA).
There is also a wider problem in that, because of his early framing of the debate, analysis of British intelligence on the Western Front can default to examining simply the interaction between two individuals. This is understandable but also misleading. Not only does it push us towards an old-fashioned ‘Great Captains’ perspective upon military history, it also overlooks the fact that the influence of an intelligence system upon a military organisation is so much broader than just the relationship between the commander and his primary intelligence officer. Although Haig’s perceptions and their origins are very important, we must seek to also understand the military intelligence system as a whole. Such an understanding of the apparatus will then permit answers to broader questions: What did the British, and in particular Haig, know about their opponent, when and how did they know it and how did that knowledge influence their actions? In essence, why did they think they were winning?

As already indicated, the British army’s conduct of operations in France and Belgium has been examined closely by historians and, within both the popular and academic literature, the attritional campaigns of 1916 and 1917 have attracted particular attention. Within this context, Haig’s conduct has always been central and it seems inevitable that he will continue to be a lightning conductor for popular interest. However, in an academic context, broader studies of the BEF have mushroomed. Building upon the more established genre of military-social history, Tim Travers’ 1987 study *The Killing Ground* helped to re-ignite interest in the operational military history of the

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6  Haig’s Intelligence: GHQ and the German Army, 1916–1918

British on the Western Front.\textsuperscript{22} This literature is still a work in progress and, in recent years, discussion of the BEF’s military effectiveness has revolves around its learning processes. Sometimes this is also placed within the context of a putative ‘Revolution in Military Affairs’.\textsuperscript{23} This book hopes to make a contribution to this wider debate about the BEF. At first glance a focus upon a military support function like intelligence might be seen as a hindrance to its direct impact.\textsuperscript{24} But intelligence was central to the interaction between the BEF and the German army on the Western Front; how they perceived their enemy should have been a major determinant in actions against them. That said, although this book concentrates upon the contribution of intelligence, it must always be remembered that it was not the only influence. At all levels commanders supplemented it with information gleaned from non-intelligence


\textsuperscript{24} For other BEF support functions, see: Ian Brown, \textit{British Logistics on the Western Front, 1914–1919} (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998); Brian Hall, \textit{The British Expeditionary Force and Communications on the Western Front, 1914–1918}, PhD, Salford (2010); Mark Harrison, \textit{The Medical War: British Military Medicine in the First World War} (Oxford University Press, 2010), 16–170.
sources, particularly operational reporting from their subordinates. Other influences included the political and diplomatic situation; the condition of the BEF, especially its doctrine and logistics; the prejudices of commanders; and the attitude of allies. But each of these aspects have been addressed in other parts of the historiography and, as will be seen, at certain points they took precedence over intelligence regarding the German army. Intelligence, therefore, cannot become a catch-all explanation for the BEF’s conduct.

John Ferris, a leading historian of intelligence, has provided a useful definition of its function:

Intelligence is the collection and analysis of information by a power, to enable it to make maximum use of its resources against rivals and potential enemies. Intelligence is not a form of power but a means to guide its use, whether as a force multiplier, or by helping statesmen to understand their environment and options, and thus how to apply force or leverage, and against whom.25

Although his explanation is focused at the international level, its tenets can also be applied to military organisations. Academic intelligence studies, including intelligence history, have developed a great deal from their origins in the 1980s.26 With regard to the general subject of British security in the early twentieth century, we are probably now beyond the notion that intelligence is a wholly ‘missing dimension’, although this may be less true for military matters.27 What is certain is that British intelligence in the Second World War, particularly the role of signals intelligence, has received considerable attention including a multi-volume official history.28 Taking Ferris’ definition as a foundation, what then constitutes military intelligence? Its boundaries are somewhat blurred and delineating it simply by military producers or consumers does not result in clarity. The former may generate material for a wider audience, while the latter may demand a wide range of political, technical, or

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26 The normal datum is the 1986 appearance of the interdisciplinary journal, Intelligence & National Security.
economic intelligence. The best way forward would seem to be an acceptance of elasticity and the application of the label ‘military intelligence’ to that required for the planning or execution of military operations. Of course, that will be contingent upon the nature of those operations and will vary over time.\textsuperscript{29} It may also be helpful to think of military intelligence as the creation and constant revalidation of a set of assumptions about the enemy. These are no different to other assumptions, such as those related to terrain or logistics, but their generation and maintenance is less straightforward as it usually requires information which an enemy is reluctant to reveal.

With regard to intelligence generally, and military intelligence in particular, there is something of a consensus that the First World War marked a step-change in its practice.\textsuperscript{30} Against the backdrop of warfare’s increased scale, intensity, duration and destructiveness, the demand for high-quality intelligence grew exponentially. However, the growth of organisations to fulfil that need did not begin abruptly in 1914. As Ferris has noted, in the late nineteenth century:

Military intelligence increasingly became the permanent and specialist part of elaborate and effective staffs, regularly collecting and assessing all forms of intelligence to guide all sorts of decisions. Intelligence became bureaucratized. Thus it became modern.\textsuperscript{31}

With Michael Handel, he also suggested the period after 1914 was a crucial transitory phase in intelligence development. They noted that strategic decision-making became increasingly dependent upon it while multiple sources emerged, making it a significant force multiplier. However, Ferris offers an important caveat, noting that attitudes to intelligence were still shaped by the doctrines that had evolved during the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{32} This book provides a comprehensive examination

\textsuperscript{29} For further discussion, see: Jim Beach, ‘No Cloaks, No Daggers: The Historiography of British Military Intelligence’, in Christopher Moran and Christopher Murphy (eds.), Intelligence Studies in Britain and the United States (Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 203.

\textsuperscript{30} Andrew, ‘The Nature of Military Intelligence’, 3; Jeffrey Richelson, A Century of Spies: Intelligence in the Twentieth Century (Oxford University Press, 1995), 47.

\textsuperscript{31} John Ferris, Foreword to Stephen Harris, British Military Intelligence in the Crimean War, 1854–1856 (London: Frank Cass, 1999), xix.

of a military intelligence system and thereby provides fresh insight into the technological, organisational and doctrinal developments of this crucial period.

The existing literature on British military intelligence during the First World War is fairly limited. The most prominent survey of the British army’s intelligence work between 1914 and 1918 is Occleshaw’s *Armour against Fate*. Although Ferris praised it as an introduction to the subject, he also suggested that Occleshaw was ‘uneven, his methodology sometimes naïve and on occasion his assessments are questionable to a spectacular degree’. It was also hampered by its very ambitious attempt to examine intelligence in every theatre and its over-dependence upon uncorroborated private papers. The overall effect is therefore informative but idiosyncratic. Studies with a narrower focus have been more successful; in particular, operations in the Middle East, where the stand-out work is Yigal Sheffy’s examination of intelligence in the Palestine campaign. The great strength of his book is that not only does he painstakingly recreate the evolving intelligence picture, but he also shows its influence upon operational decisions. With regard to collection disciplines, we have Ferris’ excellent work on signals intelligence and Terrence Finnegan’s detailed examination of Allied air photography on


34 Ferris (ed.), *The British Army and Signals Intelligence*, 351.


the Western Front. For frontline intelligence, there is Dan Jenkins’ exhaustive work on the Canadian Corps. In a number of intelligence areas, especially with regard to collection, this book draws upon this existing body of work. However, it is hoped that value has been added not just through synthesis with fresh material, but also by correction and clarification.

The book is based upon research conducted in archives across the world. Such work was necessary because of significant gaps in the materials held by the UK National Archives. But any suggestion of a deliberate attempt to tamper with the record is not very plausible. Indeed, given the long-standing availability of sensitive intelligence materials at Kew, any conspiracy has been rather unsuccessful. However, it is true that the intelligence materials are far from being conveniently packaged. As one might expect, intelligence products in particular are scattered across many files. Some, such as intelligence summaries, are grouped together and are easily identifiable but, like the operational records, all have been subjected to the vagaries of contemporaneous weeding and destruction or later neglect before reaching their current resting place. Most of the BEF records also passed through the hands of the official historians, meaning they escaped the destructive attention of the Luftwaffe in 1940, but the archive was filtered for their utilitarian purposes. Clearly there was a fairly ruthless avoidance of any duplication and this means that the richness of the intelligence record can be variable. This is best illustrated by the General Headquarters (GHQ) intelligence summaries. From August 1915 to December 1917 the National Archives holds an almost complete set, but the 1918

40 ‘[Kew] holds virtually no “I” Branch papers today’: Denis Winter, Haig’s Command: A Reassessment (London: Viking, 1991), 307. To support his accusation of a malicious weeding of the archives, Winter suggests, presumably by extrapolating from I(a) file reference numbers, that Charteris produced 4,000 ‘IA’ [sic] intelligence appreciations but that only a ‘small number’ remain extant. He would appear to have misunderstood the clerical procedure whereby all incoming or outgoing intelligence documents, not just assessments, were assigned a sequential number.
42 GHQ intelligence summaries, August 1915 to December 1917, WO157/1–26, TNA.