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978-0-521-06619-8 - Intelligence and the War against Japan: Britain, America and the Politics of Secret Service

Richard J. Aldrich

Excerpt

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1 Introduction: intelligence and empire

Foreign Secretary. What do you say? I am lukewarm and therefore looking for guidance. On the whole I incline against another S.O.E.–O.S.S. duel, on ground too favourable for that dirty Donovan.

Winston Churchill to Anthony Eden, April 1945.¹

In early April 1945, Winston Churchill requested guidance from his Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden. The subject of his enquiry, ‘dirty Donovan’, was none other General William J. Donovan, the Director of the America’s new wartime secret service, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). Donovan was the ‘founding father’ of OSS and also of its direct successor, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), where his statue now dominates the entrance to the headquarters building at Langley, Virginia. Donovan had proved himself a most sincere and valuable friend to Britain from the very outset of the Second World War, championing American intervention against the Axis in the inner circles of Roosevelt’s Cabinet in 1940 and 1941.² Moreover, the wartime years are viewed by most historians as a period during which an increasingly close and co-operative relationship was constructed between the intelligence communities of Britain and the United States.³ Prominent diplomatic historians have identified these links as being ‘at the heart of what made the Anglo-American tie so different from other alliances’.⁴ Donovan was central to this process, so it is curious to find Churchill referring to Donovan in 1945 with such unequivocal distaste.

Churchill’s outburst was provoked by clandestine rivalry over the future of China. In microcosm, this matter illustrates the complex wartime connections between the politics of secret service and the politics of empire, explored at length in this book. A vigorous dispute over secret service activity had arisen in the area around Hong Kong. Churchill had first sought the advice of Lord Selborne, the minister responsible for Britain’s wartime sabotage organisation, the Special Operations Executive (SOE). Selborne had explained that the American-controlled China Theater was attempting to exclude the British SOE mission in China. Selborne’s resources were stretched elsewhere, and he saw no military reason for SOE to intrude ‘where we are not wanted’.

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However he conceded the political aspect, noting that if SOE were present in the region ‘our recovery of Hong Kong and British Borneo might well be facilitated’.⁵

Churchill also consulted Oliver Stanley, the Secretary of State for Colonial Affairs. His attitude was very different, declaring ‘a major interest’ in the continued activities of Britain’s SOE in China, and insisting that SOE’s presence close to Hong Kong was of the ‘greatest importance’.⁶ SOE, Stanley explained, could play a crucial role in facilitating the smooth recovery of the Crown Colony of Hong Kong into British, rather than Chinese or American hands, at the end of the war. For Stanley, SOE constituted a body of shock-troops which would physically begin the recovery of British imperial territories throughout the Far East, even before the moment of Japan’s surrender. Churchill therefore decided to defend the presence of Britain’s SOE in the American-dominated China Theater. Accordingly, Churchill’s outburst was provoked by two related subjects, both of which concerned him passionately throughout his life: intelligence and empire.⁷

This study explores the interconnection between these two themes during the Far Eastern War, focusing particularly on Anglo-American colonial controversies.⁸ Accordingly, it deals with the high politics of British and American secret services in Asia, rather than cataloguing the low-level complexities of individual operations. It suggests that the intelligence failures of 1937 to 1941 owed much to a colonial *mentalité*, which prompted the West to focus on internal colonial stability rather than external threats, and also encouraged the underestimation of Japan. Thereafter, it suggests that the course of the Far Eastern War witnessed the development of separate and divergent ‘foreign policies’ by numerous secret services, some poorly controlled. Their directors, whether British, American, Chinese, French or Dutch, were increasingly preoccupied, not with the war against Japan, but with mutual competition to advance national interest in the fluid situation created by Japan’s dramatic southward expansion of December 1941.

The important role of secret service within the wider framework of American wartime anti-colonialism has often been alluded to. Donald Cameron Watt has noted how Roosevelt was receiving regular American intelligence reports about a European colonial conspiracy in South East Asia: ‘Nothing could have been more calculated to make Roosevelt’s flesh creep’, observing that the roots of this lay in ‘an inter-intelligence agency intrigue . . . within the British led South East Asia Command Area’. Bradley F. Smith, in his path-breaking study of OSS, has noted the survival of a ‘huge’ SOE organisation in Asia beyond V-J Day, explaining ‘that London used the Southeast Asian SOE contingent as a catchall organisation for those who would do the work of reestablishing British authority in the area’. William Roger Louis has also remarked in his discussions of decolonisation that intelligence ‘is a

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topic worth pursuing'.⁹ But despite these invaluable pointers, the links between intelligence and empire have not been substantially explored.¹⁰

Important recent studies have not demonstrated a consensus about the significance of secret service matters. Xiaoyuan Liu's detailed study of Sino-American wartime relations makes not a single reference to clandestine organisations, in contrast to earlier work by Michael Schaller.¹¹ Equally, recent accounts of relations between Churchill and Roosevelt have chosen to ignore secret service, despite the fact that Roosevelt shared some of Churchill's extreme enthusiasm for the subject; indeed many modern studies of the wartime 'special relationship' disregard this sphere altogether.¹² Others, by contrast, regard it as highly important, but these differences of approach are rarely articulated or explained.¹³

Accordingly, this book moves between two large but barely connected bodies of literature: one on Allied diplomacy during the Far Eastern War, the other dealing with Allied intelligence. The wider framework, developed by the late Christopher Thorne, is especially important.¹⁴ This book also seeks to provide an antidote to the official history of SOE in the Far East, which presented a misleadingly anodyne interpretation of its central purposes. This official study focused narrowly on SOE's military activities, neglecting the political dimensions, which arguably became the dominant concern of its senior officers.¹⁵

Official history has greatly advanced our knowledge of wartime secret service. As early as 1966 M. R. D. Foot's official history, *SOE in France*, demonstrated how the history of special operations should be done. In the 1980s, the complex challenge of explaining the impact of secret intelligence upon wartime strategy and operations was met by Sir Harry Hinsley and his collaborators in a magisterial series.¹⁶ But the regrettable decision not to extend this series to cover the Far Eastern War has left us with a vast lacuna. This anomaly inevitably prompted speculation about the motives underpinning that decision.¹⁷ Whatever the reason, it has denied many a place in history.¹⁸

In contrast, the treatment of the American secret service activities during the Far Eastern War has been much more satisfactory. American secret service records were declassified in the 1980s, ten years before equivalent British papers, allowing American historians to combine consideration of the written records with interviews with surviving practitioners. Indeed, the work on MacArthur's South West Pacific Area, and Nimitz's Pacific Ocean Area has been very comprehensive and accordingly this book restricts itself to the war in Asia, and does not attempt to stray into the Pacific.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the corpus of American work also contains distortions. For understandable reasons, disproportionate attention has been devoted to Indochina. The assistance given to Ho Chi Minh by the OSS, though a natural extension of Roose-

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velt's anti-French and anti-colonial policies, is a beguiling subject for a country that suffered more casualties in Vietnam than in the First World War.²⁰ But this can only be properly understood when it is placed in the context of a vigorous and broadly consistent OSS anti-colonial policy across all of Asia.²¹ Meanwhile, the work of the French and Dutch secret services remains largely a cipher.²²

The politics of empire

Wartime conflict between British and American secret services in Asia mirrored political disagreement at the highest level between Roosevelt and Churchill. While Churchill envisaged restored European colonial control in post-war Asia, Roosevelt desired rapid independence for colonies, in some cases under temporary United Nations tutelage, and the end of the British Empire system of preferential trade. Yet neither Churchill nor Roosevelt was prepared to allow their disagreements over Asian issues to frustrate their friendship, or their shared sense that the European War should take priority. The result was silence at the highest level on many sensitive questions. Both found it convenient to postpone the moment when they would have to confront the full scale of their disagreements.

Churchill was the worst offender. He repeatedly frustrated attempts by the Foreign Office to tackle Roosevelt on the question of the post-war status of French Indochina, a Rooseveltian obsession. 'Do not raise this before the presidential election, the war will go on for a long time', minuted Churchill in March 1944, in response to an urgent plea from the Foreign Office.²³ Roosevelt later complained to Eden that he had discussed Indochina twenty-five times with Churchill, adding, 'Perhaps discussed is the wrong word. I have spoken about it twenty-five times. But the Prime Minister has never said anything.' In March 1944 Churchill explicitly instructed his officials to 'adopt a negative and dilatory attitude' on these questions.²⁴ A similar silence was preserved on Thailand, due to Churchill's secret territorial designs on Thailand's southern peninsula, the Kra Isthmus. Roosevelt became equally cautious about raising the matter of Indian independence, which he felt should flow naturally from the provisions on self-determination in the Atlantic Charter, the Allied declaration of war aims, agreed in August 1941. But by 1942, he understood that attempts to discuss India simply made Churchill angry and intractable. Thereafter, silence prevailed, and in the meantime each leader attempted to inch ahead within their own areas of strategic control.

Consequently, the wartime management of these awkward questions was often passed to reluctant subordinates in the Foreign Office and the State Department, who were equally loath to articulate the full extent of their discord on Asia. Meanwhile they watched each other and waited. Allied intelli-

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gence organisations, instead of being briefed upon agreed joint post-war planning, were required to fill the silence by reporting things that might be indicative of each other's future intentions in Asia. Therefore, the American OSS, and the British SOE and its sister service, the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) – three key agent-based secret services operating in Asia – and even signals intelligence, were increasingly directed towards political and economic targets of an inter-Allied nature.²⁵ Their activities in turn exacerbated tensions at higher levels.

Secret services were rapidly drawn into the arena of foreign policy-making because, as they discovered, no military action was without political consequences. Moreover in the absence of agreed joint long-term planning, British and American commanders, their political advisers, propaganda bureaux and intelligence agencies gained an exaggerated impression of the extent to which their wartime military control would determine the post-war settlement. Operational pressures also required the rapid settlement of post-war Asian questions. The inseparability of immediate military questions from long-term political issues is nowhere more clearly underlined than in the wartime despatches of John Paton Davies.

Davies was Chief Political Adviser to General Stilwell, Commander of the American China–Burma–India (CBI) Theater and a central figure in the politics of secret service in CBI. In December 1943, soon after the formation of Mountbatten's neighbouring South East Asia Command (SEAC), he prepared a commentary on 'Anglo-American Cooperation in East Asia' which went to both Stilwell and OSS in Washington.²⁶ It explored, with remarkable prescience, the potential for Anglo-American political wrangling as the Japanese were driven back across Asia. Davies asserted that to push Japan out of Burma and Malaya was, at the same time, unavoidably to assist in the restoration of British colonial rule, adding: 'Why should American boys die to repossess colonies for the British and their French and Dutch satellites?' Moreover, Britain was secure in the knowledge that the Soviet Union was bearing the brunt of the war in Europe and the United States was taking the strain in the Pacific. This left Britain free to concentrate on the recovery of its empire in the Mediterranean, South and South East Asia. He continued:

The re-acquisition and perhaps expansion of the British Empire is an essential undertaking if Britain is to be fully restored to the position of a first class power. Therefore reconquest of the Empire is the paramount task in British eyes. The raising of the Union Jack over Singapore is more important to the British than any victory parade through Tokyo . . . This interpretation does not impute heroic qualities to the British Government; it does imply that it has lost none of its political acumen.

The display of American military strength in India and South East Asia was a problem for an empire whose façade, as British officers frankly admitted, was visibly crumbling. He noted: 'We embarrass them by our very presence,

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for the fact that it is necessary for us to be here reflects on British prestige.’ The presence of Americans working in the fields of propaganda or civil affairs in India made the British ‘acutely apprehensive lest there occur some ingenuous American outburst on the subject of liberty for colonial peoples’.

OSS was influenced by Davies’ prescient analysis of the Mountbatten approach to limiting the damage inflicted by the American presence. British tactics were to accept American assistance ‘for they have no alternative’, but subsequently to consolidate with the United States on grounds of efficient co-operation and then, ‘by dominating the integrated partnership, bring us into line with their policy and action’. Britain repeatedly tried to apply these techniques to OSS and to American propaganda bureaux, but in vain. Instead Washington followed Davies, who urged the maintenance of ‘a purely American identity’ in all things.

A ‘purely American identity’ was of even greater importance, Davies argued, in areas which had not previously been under the formal control of European empires. A highly visible commitment to anti-imperialism was essential to American credibility in the independent countries of post-war Asia such as China and Thailand, where the United States cherished her own ambitions. Therefore the danger of being associated with the British was a problem with the *widest possible* ramifications for the future of the American position in all of post-war Asia. Davies put it succinctly: ‘The Chinese and later the Thais, will feel – as many Chinese already do – that we have aligned ourselves with the British in a “whiteocracy” to reimpose western imperialism in Asia.’²⁷ To many, including Davies, the new secret services, including OSS and its sister propaganda organisation, the Office of War Information (OWI), were the ideal instruments to deal with these awkward politico-military questions and to help maintain the crucially separate American identity.

There were more specific reasons why secret services were quickly drawn into political controversies. First, from the outset, the wily nationalist and communist resistance movements in Japanese-occupied areas demanded political assurances about the future in return for co-operation with Allied intelligence. British and American secret services found themselves bidding against each other with policy statements, often extempore in nature, in order to obtain indigenous agents and influence. Such policy statements confronted sensitive political issues on which the diplomats had contrived to remain silent. Secondly, contact with senior resistance figures, in some cases clearly the embryonic political leaders of post-war Asia, offered irresistible opportunities.

Thirdly, and arguably most importantly, rivalry was exacerbated by the nature of the personnel recruited during the rapid wartime expansion of secret service. The urgent need for regional expertise and personnel fluent in

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obscure languages led them to recruit predominantly from the businessmen, financiers, traders, colonial officials and policemen active in Asia before 1941. Many of these men were keenly interested in the post-war survival or, alternatively, the demise of the European colonial economic system in Asia, along with its tariffs and preferential trade agreements. This influx of new personnel occurred at all levels. The first overall Far Eastern Director of SIS, Godfrey Denham, was a director and later Chairman of Anglo-Dutch Plantations Ltd, while the Far Eastern director of SOE appointed in 1942, Colin Mackenzie, was a Director of J. & P. Coats Limited, with extensive regional textile interests. Until Mackenzie's arrival, the most senior SOE figure had been John Keswick, a Director of the China trading conglomerate Jardine Matheson Limited. As the war progressed, SOE began to resemble empire trade in khaki. Equally, many American OSS officers had previously worked for Texaco or Westinghouse.²⁸

Empire interest within OSS, SIS and SOE met with different reactions from officials in London and Washington. In London, Anthony Eden and the Foreign Office had entertained reservations about the sabotage organisation, SOE, even from its formation in 1940.²⁹ They had found requests for political declarations to assist SOE in their contact with various resistance groups, such as the Free Siamese (Thais), awkward and tiresome. In August 1944, Sir Maurice Peterson, a senior official overseeing Far East policy confronted Mackenzie, the Head of SOE in the Far East. Peterson was not a sympathetic figure and was known to Foreign Office juniors as 'Uncle Beastly'. But he had also worked closely with both SOE and the Political Warfare Executive (PWE), and was well placed to fire penetrating questions at Mackenzie.³⁰ Peterson saw limited military value in SOE operations, and asked what the real motives were. Peterson recorded:

I had a long conversation last night with Mr Mackenzie (in private life director of J. and P. Coats) who is, I understand, head of SOE in SEAC . . . I dealt faithfully with the Free Siamese Movement and said I hoped we had heard the last of it. Mr Mackenzie was reduced to defending it on grounds of post-war trade.³¹

The re-establishment of British influence in post-war Asia was also top priority for SOE's Director of Overseas Operations, the Australian Colonel (later Brigadier) George F. Taylor, based at the SOE London headquarters in Baker Street. From mid-1943, the energetic Taylor was effectively Chief of Staff of SOE, superintending all its operations outside Europe. Passionately concerned with empire, he travelled constantly to Cairo and the Far East.³² When the British clandestine presence in China and Indochina became major issues in the London Joint Intelligence Committee towards the end of the war, it was Taylor who was determined 'to hold the floor and do all the talking'.³³

In September 1944, Taylor visited the Foreign Office for conversations

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with John Sterndale Bennett, Head of the Far Eastern Department, regarding a bitter Anglo–American–French dispute over operating boundaries for clandestine operations in Asia. Taylor advocated a tough line, explaining that SOE’s permissions in Asian theatres related directly to attempts to restore British influence throughout the region.³⁴ Taylor interpreted this dispute

as being part of an American plan to squeeze us altogether out of Indochina and Siam . . . and to relegate us to a comparatively minor role in the whole Far Eastern war. He felt that the Chiefs of Staff might look at it from a purely military point of view without giving full weight to the disastrous political results which could ensue if such intentions on the part of the United States succeeded . . . He hoped that the Foreign Office would take up the political point strongly.

Taylor then explained that SOE could compensate for the fact that Britain did not have large conventional forces in places such as China. He asked Sterndale Bennett, ‘whether, with a view to counteracting this American plan, if it existed, it would not be a good thing to intensify SOE activities in Siam, Indochina and even on the South China coast [Hong Kong]’. Taylor’s argument was that even if Britain was relegated to a minor role, ‘our share in the freeing of these territories would at least be realised locally’. The Foreign Office had traditionally been unhappy about clandestine operations of any kind, especially as a device to steal a march on Washington, and Sterndale Bennett became evasive. He suggested that this was a military matter and a question for the Chiefs of Staff alone. Taylor, however insisted that it was a political question and, to Sterndale Bennett’s alarm, proposed approaching the strategic planning teams to have his ideas inserted into a brief for a forthcoming Churchill–Roosevelt summit at Quebec in mid-September 1944. Alarmed, Sterndale Bennett told Taylor bluntly that the Foreign Office, ‘did not favour the intensification of SOE activities in Indochina, Siam and South China if this was purely intended to forestall the Americans. The friction which might be created might not be worthwhile.’

But fundamentally the Foreign Office shared Taylor’s deep concerns about Roosevelt’s future plans and accepted that all might not go well at Quebec. They were also increasingly aware of the activities of the American OSS. So Sterndale Bennett added that, after very careful consideration, they might support SOE activities ‘to mitigate the effects locally of any decision which might be taken adversely to our general interests at the forthcoming meeting with the President’. Plausible deniability for any such activity was the key. If plans could be presented as military in purpose then ‘naturally’ the Foreign Office would ‘be inclined to consider them favourably’. This whole conversation ‘was very tentative . . . and we left it at that for the moment’.³⁵

Such discussions on the underlying purpose of SOE activities in Asia were extremely rare. Taylor was not inclined to suffer restraint, while the Foreign Office was uncomfortable with Taylor’s pronounced interest in political mat-

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ters. In contrast, SOE received strong encouragement from the Colonial Office, who shared SOE's view of the political importance of pre-occupational activities and regarded Eden as unduly deferential to American anti-colonial sentiments. The Colonial Office repeatedly encouraged SOE and made available many of its personnel to facilitate operations in Asia. Equally, SOE enjoyed good relations with the British imperial network in Africa.³⁶

The politics of secret service

Insoluble political differences over the future of empire, in which the actors were sometimes personally interested, constitute the most powerful explanation of political antagonism between Allied secret services during the Far Eastern War. But the situation was vastly complicated by cross-cutting national and inter-allied disputes over the organisation and control of expanding secret services. Each country began the war with several long-established secret services and continued to launch new ones with alarming frequency throughout the war. Inevitably, in London and Washington, and later in regional centres such as Algiers, Cairo and Delhi, there ensued unseemly internal struggles over empires of a different type: the new and uncharted areas of burgeoning secret service bureaucracy.

It cannot be pretended that contests for bureaucratic power were the sole preserve of wartime government, or of secret services. Throughout the twentieth century, in both Whitehall and Washington, ministries and departments were in constant competition for resources and for control of policy. As a former Cabinet Secretary once observed, the first thing to remember about a central government is that it is 'merely a federation of departments'.³⁷ But the advent of war had transformed the bureaucratic landscape completely. In the past there had been incremental, sometimes almost imperceptible, shifts of power, with disputes tending to focus on particular issues that engaged the remit of more than one department. But now the scale of change was entirely different, with the complete re-allocation of functions, and the overnight creation of whole new ministries with ill-defined rights and permissions. Government now dealt with subjects in which, hitherto, it had not concerned itself. Established departments met these problems by launching new subsections. The British Foreign Office had twelve departments in 1940 and twenty-seven departments by 1942. In capital cities and regional centres, hotels, schools and prisons were appropriated to accommodate new organisations and temporary buildings disfigured open spaces.³⁸

In the United States, Donovan's new OSS organisation outgrew its initial building in Washington within months and the nearby National Health Institute was evicted from their offices to make room for it. The previous occupants expressed their annoyance by bequeathing them a laboratory full of

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virus-laden animals on the top floor. OSS continued to grow, expanding into vast temporary wooden buildings as its personnel mushroomed from a few hundred in 1942 to 13,000 by 1944. Plywood was the ubiquitous material that characterised bureaucratic growth. Graham Greene captures this well in his description of the Ministry of Information, based in the requisitioned Senate House at the University of London:

He opened the door of his dark room. It had been built of plywood in a passage, for as the huge staff of the Ministry accumulated like a kind of fungoid life – old divisions sprouting daily new sections which then broke away and became divisions and spawned in turn – the five hundred rooms of the great university block became inadequate: corners of passages were turned into rooms, and corridors disappeared overnight.³⁹

Meanwhile, outside Oxford, at Bletchley Park, workmen were busy erecting what would become perhaps the most famous temporary structures of the war, the numbered huts for the greatly increased staff required by the Government Code and Cypher School (GC&CS).

The politics of expanding wartime secret service quickly became notorious. Many organisations competed over new and ill-defined responsibilities. By 1939, secret and semi-secret service encompassed a broad interrelated spectrum of activities including propaganda, deception, escape and evasion, and economic warfare, as well as the more traditional forms of sabotage and espionage. In London, the ministries that had traditionally owned overseas policy, such as the Foreign Office and the Board of Trade, now found themselves rudely jostled by the new ministries, such as Economic Warfare, with vague responsibilities for everything from trading with the enemy to radio broadcasts. These disputes were difficult to ignore, for many new protagonists enjoyed direct access to Churchill or Roosevelt, and used this to press their case. Donovan's entrée to key members of Roosevelt's inner circle, such as Henry Stimson, Frank Knox and Henry Morgenthau, was especially alarming to officials in wartime Washington.

Senior figures resented the time spent adjudicating between these new shadow organisations with their ill-defined remits. The diary of Sir Alexander Cadogan, Eden's Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, perhaps the most lucid account of wartime Whitehall, reveals the nature of these problems, which had begun to dog him even in 1939:

R. A. B. [Rab Butler] about administrative questions. I can't stand these. I am suddenly told that a Department in the Ministry of Obfuscation has to be reorganised: it must come back 'under control' of the Ministry of Circumlocution. But there is a great difficulty, as the Head of the Department – Colonel Shufflebottom – ought not to be there, and I ought to substitute Mr Piffkins. (Other people tell me this is a ramp, and that the real man is Nuffkins.) I don't know S., or P., (or even N.). I can't grasp