THE STUDY OF SECRET INTELLIGENCE, ESSENTIAL CONTRIBUTION TO THE HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

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Abstract

Intelligence had a different importance in decision-making depending on the historical period of time we are referring to. Nonetheless, the study of secret intelligence for the historiographical development became more relevant in the past decades, after the end of the Cold War. With the study of intelligence, the historical perspectives and debates started to have different shapes and develop more complex conclusions, revealing, thanks to a more comprehensive analysis, aspects otherwise difficult to understand in the historical context. An appropriate example would be the study of the Second World War.

Keywords: *intelligence, historiography, decision-making, secret information, analysis.*

Introduction

We might consider the Second World War as an important inflection point in how intelligence was understood and used. Lessons of the use of intelligence and its importance in decision making were drawn after the war. Though it gained importance especially during the war, the meaningful role of intelligence in decision making and governance had not become obvious prior the Cold War.

Sherman Kent defined the concept of intelligence as knowledge, organization and process. As its role was to reduce uncertainty, and to understand the intentions and capabilities other states had, intelligence started to be an important asset for knowledge and analysis. The way intelligence communities were organized back then, had a great impact in the governance and therefore in the decisions as ''through the use of intelligence powers may gain greater knowledge of the international environment-and

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alter it'' (Ferris, 2003, pp.308-329). The outbreak, the evolution and the outcome of the Second World War taught us this.

We study the period that preceded the Second World War as a period of great uncertainty and unease when the decisions made had a great impact in the unfolding of the events. The world was living on different levels ideologically, politically, economically and therefore socially. The decisions required high levels of certainty and assurance. Secrecy had an important role to protect these decisions. Therefore, obtaining intelligence and assess it was a complex issue for the political and military authorities. With the unfolding of events, it got even more complicated. A great example of this is the Soviet Union who managed the best to maintain its military situation the most secret possible. To the extent that Adolf Hitler had no hesitation, regardless the caution of his closest advisors, to release the Operation Barbarossa in the summer of 1941.

Furthermore, with the outbreak of the Second World War, intelligence gained the right to be an active part of the decision makers unlike the period previous the war. The evolution and the importance intelligence gained during the Second World War proved that without it, a war is much more difficult to win, even impossible (a good example supporting this argument would be the break of the famous Nazi code, Enigma, with the further strategic consequences that followed). The ignorance of intelligence might have been among Hitler´s major mistakes in deciding his strategy.

The key aspect related to the intelligence of the Second World War was the way in which it was assessed. John Ferris explained that intelligence assessment in the period preceding the war and during it was essential in understanding the intentions and capabilities of both rivals and allies. Through a very interesting analysis of what he called intelligence failures, Farris pointed out the importance assessment has gained with the Second World War. He argues that the assessment failed because of different cultural, political and ideological reasons that should have not interfered in such important process. As they did, the outcome was violent, proving into a major war.

Regardless its importance and need of an accurate assessment, intelligence comes to take the place of the *missing dimension of the history,* as Cristopher Andrew described it. The secrecy surrounding the intelligence reports and analysis made the job of historians much more difficult before the declassifying of the most secret documents of the era. The mistakes in the assessment of these documents, or in the importance they were given have been better detected and the analysis much more thorough with the possibility of studying them. The relevance and the level of importance of each document were therefore better determined as the capabilities of the historians were increasing. Intelligence represented for a long time the

missing dimension of the history and it might still represent it as not all the historiographical works take it into account as rigorously as they should so it could allow a more complete analysis of the era, the strategies and decisions of back then.

Connecting with the previous point, it is relevant to point out that the history is usually written by the victorious and the perspectives given will be always subjective. A careful analysis and study of the intelligence of the period will contribute to the debate in the history and to shape different perspectives of why and how the event happened. And by no means is the Second World War different. The state of our knowledge, until the documents of the era were available for study, had been controlled by the victorious´ perspective. Declassifying the documents and intelligence reports of the era not only gave us different options of analysis but also provided us relevant information related to aspects like Hitler´s judgement, his understanding of the events, the Japanese perspective and so on. It also provided us with valuable analysis and information of how the war was won by the Allies and how the political and military alliances were forged. Without any doubt, the study of intelligence raised the quality of the debate regarding the outbreak, the evolution and the outcome of the second major quarrel the World lived in the twentieth century.

Intelligence and the Second World War

Secret intelligence in the Second World War covers a wide range of documents from intelligence reports, assessments, conversations, correspondence and different types of diplomatic reports to agreements and memoirs. This wide range could make a good argument of why is the intelligence analysis so important for the understanding of an event such as the Second World War. Even so, this argument is not enough.

As Farris taught us, the history written before 1974 did not include the intelligence in its final analysis and narration. With the access, even limited, to secret intelligence documentation the perspectives of how, why and what happened changed and developed new theories. Intelligence was necessary for the formulation of the policies by the Great Powers starting with the 1930s. This argument supports the importance intelligence analysis had in the historical evolution. The intelligence gathered in this period of time became very relevant for the understanding of the progression of events leading to the major quarrel.

Richard Aldrich reminds us that with the input of the study of secret intelligence in the thirties and forties, the international history experienced a great development (Aldrich, 1998, pp.179-217). It is particularly important to understand the situation in which the information was analysed and which were the factors that influenced the statesmen to take the decisions they took

and how they took them. By analysing this we have to consider the importance intelligence as knowledge had in the decision-making of the time. There is no surprise that the period preceding the Second World War, starting with the Great Depression, is a tense one and the tension begins to increase with the appointment of Adolf Hitler as Chancellor of Germany in 1933. The unfolding of events after his placing in office took a different pace than expected. The Munich crisis of 1938 represents a special inflection point in the understanding of the outbreak of the Second World War and of the decisions made during it nonetheless.

It is also very relevant to mention the type of states and regimes the World was dealing with. Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and Militaristic Japan were the aggressive and revisionist powers that pretended to challenge the international order and shift it. Dealing with this kind of states within the international system, made the intelligence tool in decision making both gruelling and fundamental. Gruelling because obtaining the information was difficult in repressive states where the danger of being apprehended could have had perilous consequences. At the same time, it was fundamental as it was important to have the information at the right time in order to be able to act either deterring the aggressors or defending the State. All the same was the situation with the Soviet Union. Inversely, the revisionist powers, and especially the Germans and the Japanese, needed extensive information and a correct assessment of British, American and French intelligence in order to prepare their offensive plans and to anticipate potential reactions.

The importance of intelligence is related to the way in which it was assessed and how it was used by the decision makers. Both in the 30s and during the Second World War, intelligence had a series of "failures" that drove the situations into specific directions. But the failures we may consider are mostly failures of analysis and prediction of the enemies´ intentions than failures to detect or gather the information. Maybe one of the most important examples is the misperception of the intentions that both Germany and the two allied western powers, Britain and France, had in relation with the Polish crisis (Overy, 1998, pp. 451-480); this "failure" drove them all to war. The same situation was in the case of the failed prediction of the Pearl Harbour attack. Many examples could furthermore support this statement.

The assessment of the intelligence gathered is essential, especially when intelligence is an important tool in supporting the decision-makers. Robert Bowie´s and Andrew Marshall´s debate over the importance of intelligence in policy making focused on the assessment issue of the intelligence as a process. While Bowie defined intelligence as "knowledge and analysis designed to assist action", Marshall payed special attention to the "differences between the gathering and analysis of data, on the one hand, and

making decisions partly by the use of such data, on the other" (May, 1984, p.3-4). What both come to say is that assessment is essential in shaping the policy and in making the decisions and it should be considered as a fundamental component of the intelligence cycle.

Intelligence assessment, as Marshall described it, may be categorized in relation with its aim. Thus, assessment can be used to foresee and prevent potential conflicts, compare capabilities and predict different contingencies, monitor current developments of developing conflicts and can be used to warn in case of imminent military danger (May, 1984, p.5). All these types of assessment were relevant in the outbreak, the evolution and the outcome of the Second World War.

The mistakes made in the assessment of the intelligence gathered and the failure of the statesmen into considering it objectively drove their decisions to disastrous outcomes in some situations. Peter Jackson considered this argument and developed the idea explaining that elements like racism (or ethnocentrism, as Ferris suggests), the tendency of projecting one´s own logic into others, known as ´mirror-imaging´, and the politicization of the decision-making process when taking into account the ideology, the bureaucratic political agendas and the imperatives of the domestic policies, damaged the assessment of intelligence during this period. Furthermore, this raised problems between the producers and the consumers of intelligence, without question (Jackson, 2000, p. 8). Ferris argues that ´the statesmen used intelligence to understand their environment and to alter it, and relied upon their own intuition rather than the estimates of their professional analysts´ as they were influenced by ideology and ethnocentrism (Ferris, 2003, p. 311). Therefore, the decision-makers were prevented to understand the different policies their counterparts would adopt and develop as a result of the ideology differences and difficulty in understanding.

Along with the intelligence assessment, the relation between policy and intelligence is fundamental in understanding the value that the study of intelligence brings. In order to develop their own policies, domestic or foreign, they must understand the policies that the other powers intent to develop. Ferris made a good point when he explained that the job of the intelligence services it is much more complicated than just gathering information. Ferris explains that internally, a government might have the same objective but the bodies composing that government might differ in the means by which they want to achieve those aims. This is why it is particularly important for the intelligence system to understand how the different governments work.

In the 1930s and furthermore during the Second World War, the intelligence services had a major difficulty in doing so. This might be attributed to the complex governments the revisionist powers had. The

unpredictability of the decisions made by the Führer could be found among its own general staff and therefore even the best assessment might have failed. The faction between the Army and the Navy in Japan made the assessment much more difficult. Mussolini´s alliance with Hitler, his continuous swap of preferences and the different messages he was sending with his actions also made a tough case for the intelligence assessment. The outcomes tend to lead the powers to understand the intentions of the other powers in fragmentary way and in particular instances which makes difficult the decision-making.

Even though intelligence played an important role, it was not as important in the view of the leaders of the time as ideology was. Also the ethnocentrism and the misconceptions between the cultures made them push away intelligence assessment and prioritize other aspects, less relevant in fact. Britain and France did not take Hitler´s war scares or his faith and dedication to his ideology as serious as they should have or as intelligence indicated. The mirror-imaging was also a big mistake as the government systems were completely different in aims and approaches. The arrogance with which some of the leaders treated others had a tragic effect on the environment itself. The major problem was that these kind of misconceptions prevented the statesmen to understand each other´s policy, thus to predict the outbreak of the war. Hence we could agree with Ferris when he states that ´racists, social-Darwinists and Marxists-Leninists misconstrued liberals as thoroughly as the liberals misconstrued them´ (Ferris, 2003, p. 313).

Conclusion

The state of our knowledge before the thorough study and analysis of intelligence was conditioned by the perspective of the victorious. With the study of secret intelligence we have been able to apprehend and analyse attitudes, contexts and actions that previously had only been speculations. Without knowing them, the Second World War would have remained a major question mark in many aspects.

Studying secret intelligence gave the possibility of an extensive debate and different perspectives to take into account when analysing the origins and the outbreak of the Second World War. The debate enabled by the study of secret intelligence of the period also developed interesting tools to understand the conflict whose consequences are still felt.

Without the study of secret intelligence of the Second World War, we would have probably understood the importance of intelligence and especially of the assessment of intelligence much later. Hitler had decided at the beginning of 1939 to start the war but by no means had he wanted a European conflict of international amplitude. However, the Allies, convinced that the Nazi dictator was discouraged by the different methods used by them

(diplomatic offers, economic, military, political concessions etc.) and doubting his determination and credibility encouraged involuntarily the major conflict. This could not have been understood without the comprehensive study of intelligence, as Richard Overy argues.

The brief reference to the Cold War is another argument in understanding the importance that the study of intelligence in decoding the ´true´ history of the twentieth century. The seeds of the global conflict unfolded after the peace-making appeared during the events that happened between 1939 and 1945. The decisions made by the great powers during the war lead to the so-called Cold War. This, as the global conflict mentioned previously, represents an important argument to support the relevance of a research and apprehended analysis of the secret intelligence of the previous century.

In 1989, the conflict, prolonged along so many decades ended, the victory being attributed, obviously, to the capitalist states. With the opening (still partially and very selectively) of the archives, the experts were able to develop a more thorough and realistic analysis of the World War. Nonetheless, we still do not have a complete perspective to determine to what extent its analysis represents the only perspective of the victorious. An important part of the secret intelligence of the era is still not accessible to public research; we refer, especially (although not exclusively) to the precious documents kept in the archives of the currently Russian Federation.

Again, the argument of the importance the thorough study of secret intelligence has is supported by the historical events and the posterior happenings. Historians like Richard Overy, Joseph Maiolo and Patrick Finney contributed to the understanding of this aspect.

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