Conclusion: intelligence and policy [The Image of the Enemy: Intelligence Analysis of Adversaries since 1945]

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Conclusion: intelligence and policy

By Paul Maddrell

This collection demonstrates that, during the Cold War, intelligence was only one influence on policy among many. More is known about its influence in the West than in the East, but the evidence presented in this book is that in the West, more than in the East, intelligence was a significant factor in making policy-makers less prone to exaggeration and misjudgement.

Decision-makers established the policy framework in which intelligence operated; intelligence won influence by providing good answers to questions raised by this set of policies. Intelligence sustained, rather than undermined, the policy framework; it did not call for radical policy change, in either East or West. The most important shared mindset of all was that between policy-makers and intelligence analysts that the Cold War had to be waged. Michael Herman has rightly called for realistic expectations of intelligence during the Cold War, arguing that the importance of intelligence, as a force multiplier, is greatest in war. The Cold War never became a real war; so the main task of intelligence between 1945 and 1990 was to prepare armed forces for a war which, mercifully, they did not have to fight.

How much influence intelligence had depended on the character of the government it served. The main task of the PGU and HVA’s “analysts” of foreign intelligence was to summarize and distribute information. The lesson of the collection is that the more intelligence tries to satisfy the wishes of policy-makers, the less genuine influence it has over policy. It merely becomes ammunition for a policy debate, supporting particular positions already held by policy-makers. Consequently, intelligence had no influence over the Soviet Communist regime’s understanding of the United States. Quite the opposite: ideological hostility towards the United States was so strong that intelligence had to provide evidence to justify it. This affected both the collection and assessment of intelligence. Its influence over
Soviet foreign policy initiatives was small. It often seems to have had influence not because it moderated but because it reinforced Soviet leaders’ existing outlook. For instance, in 1962 Nikita Khrushchev was fearful of American aggression; false intelligence reports about American preparations for a nuclear first strike on the USSR heightened his fear and encouraged him to order the deployment of medium- and intermediate-range nuclear missiles to Cuba. The Communist Party’s General Secretaries were so powerful that they could disregard intelligence.

Intelligence on the outside world seems to have had little influence on the policy of the East German Communist regime. It had some, though. One example is the intelligence obtained by the HVA on Willy Brandt’s Eastern policy from one of the Chancellor’s assistants, Günter Guillaume. It diminished the GDR leadership’s suspicion of Brandt and his overtures towards them. Much of this suspicion derived from ideological misunderstanding and simple wishful thinking; Erich Honecker interpreted Brandt’s first overtures towards the GDR as subversive and as reflecting a capitalist crisis in West Germany. Guillaume’s information helped to persuade the East German leaders that, while better relations with West Germany involved the risk of destabilizing their regime, Brandt was genuinely offering a measure of cooperation which would also strengthen it.

Encouraged by the gravity of the threats facing Israel, the country’s intelligence agencies have a culture of professionalism and independence of mind which has saved them from the obsequiousness of their Communist counterparts. Nevertheless, aggressive political leaders in Israel have tried to bully their intelligence services into supplying analyses supportive of their policies. It is unlikely that such an aggressive, Indophobic policy actor as Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate supplies its government with objective intelligence. Indeed, it has subordinated intelligence collection and analysis to organizing guerrilla warfare. During the Cold War, as Matthias Uhl shows, the BND had a very poor
relationship with its government; the government was skeptical of its analyses. Uhl does not show any influence on policy; it is unlikely that the service’s intelligence had much. Its primary task was, anyway, to give warning of attack.

Intelligence’s record of influencing policy is better in the United States than elsewhere. Richard Kerr’s assessment has been referred to above. During the Cold War, the US intelligence community tried harder than its Communist counterparts to educate policymakers and challenge their thinking. Ben Fischer maintains that National Intelligence Estimates had no effect on policy. They reflected, rather than initiated, changes in official thinking in Washington. NIEs reflected policy in the 1970s in arguing that detente would enable the United States to influence the USSR’s international conduct; they also did so in the late 1980s in overestimating Gorbachev’s staying power. (By contrast, the analyses of the CIA’s Office of Soviet Analysis (SOVA) made the George H. W. Bush Administration fully aware of the deterioration in Gorbachev’s political position in the years 1989-91 and of his vulnerability to a coup. When the coup came, in August 1991, SOVA rightly maintained that there was a strong chance that it would fail.9)

While NIEs may have had no influence on US policy in the late Cold War, other forms of intelligence did have an impact. The intelligence obtained from the British agent in the KGB’s First Chief Directorate, Oleg Gordievsky, on Soviet fear of an American first strike prompted President Reagan, from late in 1983, to moderate his aggressive rhetoric about the USSR. Economic intelligence was a valuable influence on him as well; it persuaded him, in the mid-1980s, that Gorbachev’s economic reforms were aggravating, rather than alleviating, the Soviet Union’s economic difficulties; that the Soviet leader needed arms control; and that arms control negotiations were therefore worth pursuing.10

Intelligence may well have more influence on counter-terrorist policy. American leaders were encouraged to trust their own judgement in determining Cold War policy by the
lack of intelligence on Soviet leaders’ intentions. American Presidents also met their Soviet counterparts, which further encouraged them to trust their judgement. They do not meet terrorist leaders; such contacts are therefore no longer a rival influence to intelligence. Terrorism, as a hidden threat, is one which intelligence is particularly well suited to explaining to policy-makers. Mark Stout demonstrates that intelligence on jihadism has influenced US policy; it has made clear to US policymakers that jihadists are a small minority and that most Muslim opinion does not favor this course. This has encouraged US government to take non-violent measures to prevent radicalization.

1 Freedman, US Intelligence and the Soviet Strategic Threat, 190.

2 See Garthoff, “Foreign Intelligence and the Historiography of the Cold War,” 40-41.

3 Herman, “Intelligence Effects on the Cold War: Some Reflections,” 38-41.

4 See Freedman, US Intelligence and the Soviet Strategic Threat, 192-94.

5 Andrew and Mitrokhin, The Mitrokhin Archive, 722.


7 Markus Wolf, Spionagechef im geheimen Krieg (Munich: List Verlag, 1997), 267-68.


9 Andrew, For the President’s Eyes Only, 505-7, 510-11, 518, 526-30.

10 Andrew, For the President’s Eyes Only, 475-7, 494-5.