

INTELLIGENCE STUDIES AND WESTERN HISTORIOGRAPHY

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Abstract. Intelligence is a typically Western word that refers to the specific history of Western rationalism. Intelligence structures inherit this rationalism, which has been applied to every sector of life and nature. Along with various other factors, Western hegemony has been the masterpiece of intelligence superiority.

For centuries, Western intelligence was conducted in utmost secrecy, occupying only a tiny space in history, largely relegated to accounts of ruling classes and mysteries of the state. This began to shift in the 1960s, leading to a surge in research, though often flawed by a lack of theoretical foundation and insufficient awareness of methodological issues. Intelligence should not be confused with espionage; it must be rethought (including its past) in light of the new challenges humankind faces today.

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1.

Scholars, practitioners, and observers have offered various definitions of ‘intelligence’ and explained why their definitions are essential. In *The Economist* on July 1, 2024, for instance, I read the following definition from the magazine's defense editor: “Intelligence services spend their time obtaining the secrets of others, protecting their own secrets, and engaging in covert activities that other arms of government would rather disclaim: building influence, maintaining secret contacts with terrorist groups, disrupting plots, or assassinating foes.” This is not my point.

From the outset, I emphasize that a particular definition underpins the following pages. Intelligence must not be confused with espionage and its various narratives; rather, it should be understood as a supreme governmental function periodically activated, structured, and implemented in different ways, always aimed at achieving information superiority in existential confrontations that are crucial for life and death. Espionage is the second oldest profession in the world, while intelligence is a relatively recent and conceptualized notion.

From Carnap to Nagel, there is a large consensus on the unity of the sciences as a unity of method¹. Thanks to the unity of the scientific method, the functional approach can develop operationalized rules, definitions, hypotheses, and causal relationships. Highlighting governmental function means connecting intelligence with

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the analysis of the ruling and political classes, which has a relevant tradition of paying specific attention to what happens in a democracy. On the matter, the Italian school of political science has been well known and appreciated, starting with Joseph Schumpeter up to Burnham, Wright Mills, Lipset, Lindblom, Huntington, Dahrendorf, Nye, Acemoglu, and Robinson².

Secrets and intelligence have been incorporated into the upper levels of government since the birth of the modern state. However, for many reasons, plots, false flag operations, and conspiracies have long remained hidden by history, even if they constitute a constant element in all forms of government and opposition to that government³. Trivial and made-up conceptions of liberalism and democracy have had difficulty accepting what they naively perceived as a contradiction⁴.

There is a concealed dimension in every human life and almost all human relationships. According to the best sociological theory⁵, societies progress through the ‘capacity for generalized adaptation’ to their environment, like biological organisms. Progress is achieved mainly by developing specialized institutions, ‘evolutionary universals’ such as bureaucracies, money, and markets. Realism and espionage have had a great tradition outside the West, from Kautilya and his *Arthashastra* to Sun Zu and his *The Art of War*, but intelligence is factually a Western matter, rooted in its most excellent specificity: systematic application of rationality to increasing aspects of life and nature⁶. Even outside the West, the greatest historians, from Ibn Khaldūn to Sima Qian, have reflected on history in a rational way. Still, the Western kind of rationalism is specific and, from Herodotus⁷ to Max Weber⁸, has been periodically refined and has been characterized in a unique way.

The ancient Hippocratic doctrine of the logical interdependence of ἀνάμνησις (recollection), διάγνωσις (diagnosis), πρόνοια (foresight), and θεραπεία (therapy), laid the foundation for Western historiography, in alliance with Euclidean logic and Socratic inquiry. Thucydides takes up the Hippocratic doctrine almost literally. Following the same rational method that is honored in every scientific research, each historian frames their search with intent; the final εὑρεσις (discovery), as illustrated in the Archimedes anecdote, is the necessary outcome of a cognitive, theoretical path.

The invention of handwriting was not straightforward, and at its inception, “it was something like a thunderclap in human history, which our bias of familiarity has converted into the rustle of papers on a desk”⁹. Later, it evolved into a theory, as proper handwriting requires a set of symbols and rules. Historiography is not merely a collection of perspectives on factual records—events deemed worthy of narration¹⁰—but something much richer: a battleground of written memories intimating the meanings of human experience. Historiography is an unbroken chain of connected ideas, often leading into the philosophy of history and life.

Kant refined the scientific principle by connecting it to the Galilean standard, the model for all inquiry¹¹, including history: every search follows a reasoned mental plan. Even serendipitous discoveries are recognized only within a pre-existing, logically organized framework. As Max Weber noted, even those who are completely outside the Western tradition can grasp this universal scientific method.

Intelligence is an eminent part of this specifically Western development¹². The development of intelligence utilities and affairs has been a powerful Western

evolutionary tool, even if not all historians have been fully aware of this issue. The most evident aspect of Western systematic rationalism, which begins with Hippocrates, Euclid, and Archimedes, is its extraordinary scientific and technological growth. Correctly understood, intelligence has been the invisible part of that very visible world.

A clear opposition exists both in folklore and in the tabernacle of the studies in history, which can be summed up in Friedrich Nietzsche's merciless condemnation and Marc Bloch's vibrant rehabilitation. The uselessness of history for life is, in a certain sense, reversed by Bloch when he quotes Henry Pirenne: "If I were an antiquarian, I would have eyes only for old stuff, but I am a historian. Therefore, I love life". He added that grasping the living everywhere is, in fact, the sovereign quality of the historian. As different as Nietzsche and Bloch were, they both placed life at the center of historical studies. Since intelligence, synthetically, deals mainly with survival, its centrality can be easily understood even if it has been ignored or neglected by many.

In today's culture, many examples of underestimation of the pivotal role of intelligence exist in Anglophone countries and even among the most cited and respected historians. However, the tendency to see "history from below" has not favored the tendency to see "history from behind"¹³. Many have rebelled against a generic way of understanding history as a chronological placement of a circumstance, "*dans l'histoire*"¹⁴. History has been seen from all sides, from below, above, sidereal distances, and even under a microscope, as Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie did on the Cathars of Montañou and Carlo Ginzburg on the worms and rot at the stake of the Inquisition.

At most, there has been a tendency to see history from "the underground", as Hamlet advised, and Hegel fully appreciated it. Hegel translated Hamlet's hallucinate words with "*Brav gearbeitet, wackerer Maulwurf*": he emphasized courage because the work of history is essentially a feverish but blind will, for itself and contemporaries, aimed at a weird and unpredictable end: the mole of history digs its paths in deep, twisted, unknown directions and will emerge suddenly; no one knows when or where. On the contrary, intelligence digs underground tunnels precisely to avoid unpleasant surprises and organize the tumultuous course of human actions.

Even if it was not a majority rule, "history from behind" had scholars who were considered among the greatest of all time. This is the operative area closest to what we call intelligence today. I will only remember Ronald Syme and Lewis Namier (who was a Vilfredo Pareto student and was greatly influenced by his elite theory when constructing his own historiographical criteria). They allow us to illustrate a peculiar part of intelligence's prism. When Syme died, many said he was probably the most eminent classicist of his century or even the greatest historian after Gibbon¹⁵. He devalued antiquarian statements as secondary events and focused on the political and cultural elites to determine the fundamental events.

It has been suggested that, together with the theory, he developed the practices of the secret by carrying out intelligence activities and receiving wide high-level recognition¹⁶. Syme was knighted in 1959, and, in 1976, he was awarded the Order of Merit, Britain's most desired civil distinction. The grim realism that characterized Syme's conceptual vision has also been compared to the methodological influence of Lewis Bernstein Namier. Syme's *The Roman Revolution*, published in 1939, has been compared closely to Namier's debated masterpiece, *The Structure of English Politics at the Accession of*

George III, published in 1929. With an advantageous methodological observation, Arnaldo Momigliano proposed that Syme had ‘namierized’ the imperial past. “But Syme had not yet read Namier when he wrote his book... On the other hand, other historians, particularly those outside the classical fields, had indeed read Namier and because of that probably found it easier to understand what Syme was doing. The connection with Namier may therefore be helpful in comprehending the reception of Syme’s work”¹⁷.

According to Syme, the lust for power motivates most human careers and Rome was ruled in secret¹⁸, a crucial dimension of any government that has ever existed¹⁹. This perspective can be interpreted as grim cynicism. Still, this supposed cynical interpretation would be completely wrong because his perspective introduces a more prosaic and realistic vision of political life, but not for this desperate. Namier’s analyses provide a perfect example. When he summarized a part of his research on the widespread corruption in classical England with the famous phrase, “No one bribes where he can bully,”²⁰ he offered a vision of an open society that is also an antidote against every form of fanaticism and extremism.

To a good extent, those who correctly study the role of intelligence in history today do not refer to the old traditions of the *Arcana Imperii*²¹ or the *Staatsräson*²². They see the events influenced by intelligence within the broader context of the political, military, economic, and scientific successes that characterize Western history and the specific value placed on adaptation, inventiveness, citizenship, inclusiveness, science, and rationality. This combination of factors contributed to victories²³ that are inseparable from the intelligence of the victors, and they write a history that continues to teach nearly nothing to the losers, the unfortunate, and the uninformed. In an excellent conceptualization effort, Polybius wrote history in the singular for the first time and, just at the beginning of his work, advised: “Mankind has no better guide to action than... the study of the record of other men's misfortunes”²⁴.

Even though a large part of history is made in secret, the rulers have not crushed the antagonistic classes; on the contrary, they have frequently responded using the same means. In 1789, the French Revolution sparked a ‘conspiracy from below’ across Europe. In 1796, Babeuf promoted the *Conjuration des Égaux*. During his lifetime, the term ‘communist’ did not exist, but Karl Marx later praised Babeuf for having ‘originated the communist idea.’ Babeuf believed conspiracy was necessary, and Marx called him ‘the first revolutionary communist.’ Marx himself wrote *Herr Vogt* (where, in 1860, using open sources, he accused Karl Vogt of being in Napoleon’s pay—a serious charge later confirmed in 1871 when the Communards published documents previously kept classified) and *Secret Diplomatic History of the Eighteenth Century* (where he examined hidden and surprising meanings in reports, letters, and diplomatic documents). In his early revolutionary years, Marx was connected to various secret workers’ societies, and he, in turn, became a target of counter-revolutionary police operations, which even fabricated false accusations and dragged him into a trial on those grounds. Marx saw history as a realm where revolutionaries and spies operated in the shadows—unseen yet active. Leftist thought of the time shared a suspicious and conspiratorial outlook, in this regard overlapping with conservative perspectives.

The leftists were not academics; they engaged little in historical study but much in political action. A fragmented multitude of sects created a parallel, secret universe

that remains challenging to fully understand precisely because of its conspiratorial nature, which limits archival evidence or confines it to police records—evidently biased toward institutional objectives, even when employing extensive documentation and pioneering sources. Nonetheless, a careful historian can go beyond partial or missing documents to trace a historical movement's deeper, sometimes counterintuitive, significance. From 1815, in the wake of the Congress of Vienna, secret societies proliferated across Europe, becoming the 'direct'²⁵ precursors of modern political associations and democratic mass parties.

2.

Few passages in Western culture are as significant as Chapter XIII, paragraph 7 of *De Cive* (1642), where Thomas Hobbes offers notably explicit and grandiose praise of intelligence as the essential foundation of any government. Hobbes does not use the word 'intelligence' directly; instead, he employs intimations, metaphors, and approximations. He refers to 'discoverers,' 'spiders,' and, of course, 'spies.' Although his language fluctuates, the role of these figures is crystal clear: to provide supreme information. His assessment of spies is profoundly celebratory: they "are like the beames of the Sunne to the humane soule.... Therefore are they no lesse necessary to the preservation of the State, than the rayes of the light are to the conservation of man". These intelligent people must not be few or exceptional; Hobbes says that they must "be compared to spider webs, which extended on all sides by the finest threads, doe warn them, keeping in their small holds, of all outward motions".

Hobbes's words are not isolated academic observations but the cornerstone of an entire intellectual framework. His reasoning is part of a larger structure whose foundations remained largely unquestioned throughout the great English tradition—from John Locke to Adam Smith—and across European thought up to Rousseau, as Hayek extensively emphasizes in his most important work²⁶. Many have built on these solid foundations, often in a brilliant counterintuitive way, from Mandeville to Robert Merton, who dazzlingly explained that even crime plays an important social function.

This exclusive connection between government, information, and intelligence is the culmination of a long Western history. The concept of intelligence takes our meaning with the first global activities of the post-medieval world, specifically in Florence and the Republic of Venice, which was among the first city-states to create a structured intelligence system²⁷.

By 840–841, the Venetian *Doge* was negotiating international agreements. The unusual maritime position of Venice gave her a peculiar economic function as a trading intermediary. A Venetian ruling class of merchants ruled the Adriatic Sea, then controlled the trade between the Fertile Crescent and Europe, and finally undermined the crumbling power of the Byzantine Emperors who for centuries had relied not on wars but on information and diplomacy, including bribes and proxy, as ultimate tools for their survival²⁸. Along with many other factors²⁹, an innovative intelligence mentality made the 1,153 years of the Eastern Roman Empire possible. A more modern conception of intelligence was essential even to creating the Venetian Empire, which succeeded Byzantium. From then on, economic intelligence became pivotal in the Western world.

Out of complicated philological problems, the system established in Venice directly influenced the English model. Venice pioneered strategic advancement methods as a unique thalassocracy, understood in terms of Mahan and Schmitt. The Italian Renaissance, with Machiavelli as only one figure among many, showcased a fusion of diplomacy, governance, and commerce within a single intelligence framework. Venetian spies, operating domestically and abroad, prioritized information, focusing on assessing adversarial weaknesses and future threats, forming the core of what can now be termed intelligence adequately understood. Venetian spies used all sorts of illegal tools. However, information was the most pursued element.

The word intelligence was little used in Italy then, but with an important exception: Machiavelli. He used ‘intelligence’ as a more nuanced and meaningful synonym for information. Moreover, he employed typical means of intelligence, starting with ciphered letters and blending private life with public affairs³⁰. This point is significant because Machiavelli was England’s most widely read political author then. The English ruling class brought those old Italian roots to an incomparable enhancement. Hobbes made his political apprenticeship staying long in Italy, as Walsingham did³¹. In 1531, in *The Book Named the Governour*, Sir Thomas Elyot advocated foreign travel because of its potential benefits for state intelligence, using the word in our current meaning.

The conceptual and practical domain later termed ‘intelligence’ played a crucial role in establishing Venetian supremacy and, when combined with other Machiavellian elements from Italian experience, was adopted as a model in England. The English intelligence system became the first genuinely modern intelligence apparatus. England adopted the conceptual contributions of the Venetian model—alongside other Italian influences, particularly Machiavelli’s insights. The English refined these Mediterranean and Renaissance roots to an even greater perfection, coining the term ‘intelligence’ to encompass more than just espionage, corruption, seduction, extortion, sabotage, assassinations, and poisonings. The ruinous³² fall of the Spanish Empire started with English dominance in the field of intelligence³³.

In the 17th Century, Amsterdam and Holland were the first heirs of the intelligence culture of the Venetian Empire and Italian Renaissance. With solid financial capitalism and a new shipbuilding industry, the Dutch anticipated and prepared England's trade dominance. Afterward, Britain replaced the Netherlands as a hegemonic power. In the English redefinition of the old word intelligence - which became denser than espionage, spies, secret services, and covert paramilitary operations - the economy plays a central role. In particular, in all the intelligence sectors, there was the supremacy of Western rationality's technical and theoretical developments.

In 1520, Machiavelli wrote *L'Arte della Guerra*, the art of war. In 1647, the English mathematician, astronomer, and cartographer Nathaniel Nye wrote *The Art of Gunnery*, explaining that war was also a science focusing on trigonometry, higher arithmetic, abstract mathematics, and systematic cartography. The thrust of Western rationalism has progressively affected every sector of life and nature, including war, espionage, and intelligence. The term ‘intelligence’ was not chosen and used by chance; logographers, rulers, practitioners, ambassadors, and leaders recognized the need to encapsulate, in a single word, the union of distinct concepts—secrecy, cunning,

espionage, culture, science, warfare, and information. The term 'intelligence' already existed, but from that point on, it gradually took on a specific meaning: a superior and distinct form of warfare, while the older term 'spies' continued to be used as well³⁴.

After the axis shift in world civilization, from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, intelligence was brought to its highest perfection in England. From Walsingham to the East India Company, subsequently, with the management of Middle Eastern oil and up to the present day, intelligence has been a substantial concern in the geopolitical domain, merging private and public interests³⁵.

Several key points are fundamental to fully understanding what transpired; I will highlight only one here: the connection with culture and sciences. For centuries, the powerful and sophisticated use of cryptography in Venice³⁶ has made the need for a technical specialization in this field clear to Englishmen. Subsequent developments continued along this intellectual path, with an extensive list of famous names illustrating this point, with Alan Turing obviously in the foreground.

From Cambridge to Oxford, prominent thinkers played significant roles in various intelligence steps, including types such as Margaret Mead or Herbert Marcuse. This is a central and often overlooked aspect, yet it offers the most profitable perspective on the field. British intelligence (and later American intelligence, which is in part an extension and in part a *democratization* of it) has consistently sought to recruit and leverage the top intellectuals from universities, finding practical applications for each professional specialization within significant warfare objectives. This integration of espionage, science, and culture within intelligence is unique in world history and largely explains the Anglosphere's ongoing preeminence.

In conclusion, the English experience offers an organizational model of practical skills and a hierarchical scale of intellectual priorities that has remained unsurpassed in terms of power and wealth. As a complex governmental function, intelligence should be understood as a vast network and a potent (albeit dispersed, concealed, and silent) informational system permeating the nation, with 'secret services' forming only the operational and paradoxically most visible part. From WWII forward, even in the USA, a vital linkage has been made between the academy and the intelligence field, connecting very different sectors, such as the Manhattan Project or the humanities departments, in the same framework. Scholars were roused "out of their carrels" in WWII and formed the "first full-scale network of professional spies"³⁷. After the war, academic recruitment and networking evolved typically; top universities became a golden pipeline to intelligence.

3.

In absolute contrast to espionage, intelligence frequently aims to create 'its' truth as much as to search for truth. This is why counterintelligence is frequently a nervous breakdown job in a wilderness of mirrors. Its practitioners must think the unthinkable and not trust anyone, analyzing each fact, document, and person, considering that it may be a deception or an intrigue prepared by antagonistic structures. Constant crookedness characterizes this professional view of the world - some call it paranoia, a kind of occupational disease for those who do this type of work³⁸. When left to rot, secrets can become an illness and dangerous to those who live with them.

Intelligence studies move in this world of duplicity and suspicion. Historians have long neglected it because it is not a simple, straightforward, evident, clean world. Then everything changed.

Investigation searches for truth; often, intelligence creates its specific truth or even a series of truths, which are alternatives and camouflages to the “*true truth*” itself. This perspective necessarily calls to mind a classical and religious question: What is truth?

Theological truth-searching—from Jewish, Christian, and Islamic concealment and revelation to Enlightenment’s disenchantment—is frequently, if not obsessively, a dispute on (un-)veiling. From its origins, this search has not been dominant in the religious field alone; it has almost immediately become secularized and has progressed along a parallel non-religious track. The search for each historical truth from Ancient Greece to modernity is also a search for the veil that unfolds truth. There is intense metaphysical thinking on interiority and exteriority, appearance and substance, surface and depth, truth and veil, and so on. If all the world is a stage, many things accordingly happen behind the scenes, and there are puppeteers, scripts, and prompters.

The logic of secrecy has greatly hindered historical studies. Even the existence of SIS (MI6) was not officially admitted until 1992. Beyond the secrets and manipulations, there are centuries-old prejudices inside the archives, for example, towards women. From Aphra Behn to Elizabeth Murray, many events have clearly shown that women profoundly infiltrated the allegedly male world of intelligence since the beginning of modernity. Despite the unpardonable shortcomings of condescending historiography, in the intelligence field, many invisible women—from lady-in-waiting to helpful servers—have sourced secret and vital information. The intelligence bias and the gender bias have been connected in man-made historiography; as a consequence, many women have been forgotten³⁹. Gaps like these are frequent in Western history and, therefore, in its historiography. In the U.K., women only gained the same voting rights as men in 1928. In the USA, the 19th Amendment granted women the right to vote in 1920. Despite the recognition of these rights, women continued to face runaway sexism and discrimination. Even men like Alan Turing have long been forgotten in official reenactments, and this profile alone gives a good idea of the difference between what historical studies on intelligence are now and what they have been in the past. Turing’s work was decisive for many in determining the outcome of the Second World War; nevertheless, his contribution has been kept secret and shameful for years.

The world of fairy tales is not the world that intelligence experts live in daily. Although a great part of reality is observable, that small part that is concealed is often decisive, for example, regarding economic power. In a few countries, political crime is well-documented and visible. In most others, crime and corruption may be even more pervasive, yet remain largely hidden. According to undecieved observers, international crime fiction and international legal thrillers tell some truth that would otherwise be unknown or almost. Friedrich Durrenmatt’s Switzerland or Stieg Larsson’s Sweden are good examples of national contexts that would otherwise seem absolutely clean but are actually sometimes obscure.

While the search for truth exists in all human cultures, the West has experienced bifurcations that have played a crucial historical role, constituting cleavages

of relevance between various national experiences. For centuries, intelligence history has been conducted in the most jealous secrecy. Therefore, it was invisible. In the famous words of Abraham Lincoln, America is committed to “an open field and a fair chance for your industry, enterprise and intelligence”. Democracy has changed all this not because it has made everything visible but because it has established a new standard, constituting a turning point from a historiographic point of view. Consequently, many believe there is transparency today where, by definition, there cannot be.

The history of intelligence has been genuinely shaken by the gradual advent in America, especially after the Sixties, of a new kind of democracy extended not only to elections but to many other aspects of political life. In the 1950s and well into the 1960s, there was an attitude of trust in the United States towards the FBI and the CIA that bordered on a blank cheque. The FBI and the CIA were considered an essential part of the ‘invisible government’ of the United States and were consequently highly supported and respected. Some statements by American politicians in that period are very significant: they voluntarily rejected the idea of control over the most critical intelligence bodies in the country. In an interesting debate in the 1950s, during which the idea of establishing a parliamentary inspection commission was rejected, Senator Russell argued that the CIA was the type of government agency that should not be subjected to political investigations due to its nature. Senator Saltonstall emphasized even more forcefully that as a member of Parliament and citizen, he preferred not to know what the CIA was up to⁴⁰.

This attitude was wholly overturned during the Sixties and the endless controversies that followed the assassinations of the Kennedy brothers and Martin Luther King. The Bay of Pigs and other events made the CIA a public institution. After the explosion of the Watergate affair and the controversies that followed the coup d’état in Chile, it was concluded that precisely because of its specific nature, the CIA had to be subjected to careful public-political-parliamentary control more than any other government agency. In the mid-Seventies, intense investigations began in the United States, starting with the Church and Pike Committees⁴¹.

Regarding the CIA, it has been rightly argued that the enormous incidence of parliamentary inspection is a unique fact in world history. There has never been a secret service so subjected to the surveillance of public opinion, observers, pressure groups, and politicians. Some note the negative consequences of this situation above all, but others underline the positive aspects. After recalling his participation, for twenty years, in secret meetings with five American presidents (in which policies relating to the use of secret services were also decided), Gates recognized that some hypotheses that later appeared profoundly erroneous probably would have become reality if in those meetings there had not been the looming fear of a subsequent parliamentary inquiry⁴². The CIA and all public organizations in the United States are subjected to an absorbing system of controls. In a crucial hearing of the House crime subcommittee, the then director of the FBI, Louis Freeh, invited the parliamentarians to strengthen the controls on the body he directed, concluding with a statement that can only surprise the unwary observers of American affairs: “We would potentially be the most dangerous agency in the country, if we were not carefully monitored”⁴³. In general, pluralism is a fact so structurally present in the United States that it can be misunderstood by observers

accustomed to reading that reality according to the schemes of clientelism and the division of the spoils.

After the problems of the Sixties and Seventies in the United States, journalists, academics, and politicians, each in their way, for different purposes and with various approaches⁴⁴, tried to control precisely those phenomena that had produced devastating consequences. That new ideal climate constituted a turning point for intelligence studies, and a new era began.

After an adverse election result, Carter and Turner were forced to retire from their institutional roles, and there have been considerable attempts to go back. However, the conviction has prevailed in American society that democracy and transparency have enormous costs. Still, in any case, it is preferable to bear those costs rather than leave areas of power uncontrolled and autonomous.

Apparently, there is a notable commitment to renewal and transparency, for many years now⁴⁵. The Western intelligence community has substantially transformed and restructured itself, becoming increasingly embedded in the knowledge industry and the military-industrial complex, which have also evolved significantly. From the Brookings Institution⁴⁶ to Starlink⁴⁷, intelligence culture is deeply integrated into major institutions and advanced technological sectors, simultaneously fostering transparency and often perceived as operating within the so-called 'deep state.' Future historians will have much to analyze to understand contemporary intelligence's secret operations.

The democratic thirst for truth and transparency has had significant successes. For instance, there is an important literature on financial crime that has developed in the wake of various scandals and investigations - from the Franklin National Bank to the Long-Term Capital Management Fund, from the IOR to the Bank of Credit and Commerce International, to the more recent problems of HSBC and UBS. Moreover, there are sensational journalistic investigations – such as those of the Panama Papers and FinCen files – and shocking revelations of the “repentants” of predatory finance⁴⁸. The works of authors such as Stephen Platt, Robert Mazur, John Perkins, Hervé Falciani, and Adair Turner are well-known and are considered reliable by authoritative observers. We know that the world of 2007 was a central bankers' paradise. However, we know very little about what is being done secretly to ensure the dollar's supremacy and the international system's shaky architecture.

Broadly speaking, the earlier flaws in intelligence studies reflect an old era of the West, while newer flaws mark a new era. In intelligence work, secrets and mysteries remain shrouded in darkness, like a 'black night where all cows are black.' In common perception, there is no more visibility now than in the past. However, there is awareness that one lives in the dark or at least in poorly tolerated ignorance regarding intelligence problems and circumstances. The popularity of conspiratorial ideas and terms like 'deep state' are symptoms of this cognitive deadlock. Truth seekers have turned to dissecting the past as the present remains largely invisible, hidden in the 'basement' of a history that is yet unwritten and only imagined in diverse, creative ways.

There has been an explosion of studies. In an increasingly fast-paced and incomprehensible world, a once-immobile past has emerged⁴⁹, ready to be thoroughly examined. The new chaotic era of intelligence studies is not merely a matter of widespread paranoid, schizoid, or schizotypal disorders. Notably, some respected

democratic theorists argue that an invisible history of dark operations parallels an equally invisible history of the ruling elites—even in democratic systems⁵⁰.

4.

Intelligence folklore dominates contemporary mythology, yet intelligence culture remains largely absent from modern historical thinking. This gap has led some to coin the term Historical Attention Span Deficit Disorder (HASDD)⁵¹. Even when intelligence is addressed, its interpretation often suffers from forms of HASDD. The intelligence dimension has been little and inadequately studied even because it is profoundly dirty, polluted, concealed, and, therefore, difficult to see, understand, and document. The intelligence historian Sir Michael Howard observed in 1986, “So far as official government policy is concerned, the British security and intelligence services do not exist. Enemy agents are found under gooseberry bushes, and our own intelligence is brought by the storks”⁵².

Necessarily, most spies leave scant documentation of their activities, and the most crucial intelligence successes must be kept undercover. Concerned historians must dig deep into archives, libraries, and private collections, transcribing hundreds of letters, breaking cipher codes and their keys, studying sympathetic inks, and interpreting riddles, acting as modern-day spymistresses to unearth.

Intelligence issues provoke opposing moral, ideological, and political perspectives. However, a respected historian will always substantiate his interpretation with honest and reliable documentation, fully aware that intelligence sources are among the most obscure, tainted, manipulated, and contested. “History is made with written documents when one has them. But it can be made; it must be made with everything that the historian’s genius can allow him to use”⁵³. The intentional falsification of history is not confined to figures like David Irving or flat-earthers. *Quellenkritik*, the critical assessment of sources, is at the core of historical scholarship and predates Ranke. *Geschichtsklitterung* dates back to 1582 in Johann Fischart’s *Affentheurlich Naupengeheurliche Geschichtklitterung*. Today, critical documentation analysis represents a fundamental professional test for historians, marking the transition from the 19th-century view that ‘facts speak for themselves’ to the 20th-century view that ‘there are no facts, only interpretations’.

A document may be fabricated, modified, or falsified. Its distortions can extend beyond personal interests: it may be influenced by defense mechanisms (à la Sigmund Freud), preunderstanding (à la Hans-Georg Gadamer), involuntary biases in memory (à la Elizabeth Loftus), performance noise (à la Daniel Kahneman), or automatic biases in interpretation (à la John Bargh). Countless issues can distort human sources of information.

Much recent academic research, often rooted in a wealth of archival sources—many of which were previously undiscovered—has proven valuable from various perspectives, shedding light on the particularities of intelligence’s field⁵⁴. Western dominance, the masterpiece of intelligence, has been put to a severe trial, thus offering a supreme test to judge a concept and a time.

One for all. Ten years after her earlier work on the dark aspects of British imperialism in Kenya, Caroline Elkins has not produced another history of the British

Empire but a challenging conceptual challenge on this topic⁵⁵. In contrast to Winston Churchill's assertion that Kenya was an exception, Elkins has asserted that the repression there was not an unfortunate anomaly but rather indicative of the violent methods employed across the thirty-six other imperial territories. By examining similar cases—such as the Boer War, the Irish War of Independence, as well as uprisings in India, Iraq, and Palestine, and the governmental approaches in Cyprus and Malaya—Elkins concludes that violence was a foundational element of the British Empire. Her research documents practices that included summary executions and torture. The Pax Britannica, she argues, was essentially built on a dual narrative: public declarations of civilization burdens were used to mask the brutal techniques employed to defend colonial rule at any cost. The British colonial administration was thus camouflaged and promoted as a supposed act of redemption, grounded in the belief that their virtuous mission stemmed from an unquestioned Western superiority, shared only through the inevitable suffering of the colonized.

Each document must be understood within its historical context and interpreted through broader categories, particularly the murky questions of intelligence. One of Elkins' conclusions is that the horrific violence against civilians was not an isolated occurrence of monstrous irrationality but rather part of a broader pattern. The Empire, as portrayed by Elkins, rests on a foundation of “legalized illegality.” Are these cases part of a systemic pattern? According to Elkins, yes.

Critics have rightly pointed out that her book needs more depth in conceptualization, with key arguments strikingly lacking nuance. Little attention is given to comparing historically existing alternatives, and British Empire atrocities are scarcely juxtaposed with those of other empires, nations, and cultures. Many of Elkins's cases must be placed in more complex contexts involving international politics and local ethnic and religious conflicts. The issue of historians drawing sweeping conclusions from minor or dubious events has been debated countless times. As Toynbee remarked about prosopographers, “Their work has been invaluable; yet their findings must be taken cautiously and examined critically. Able and active minds, reduced to a starvation diet of knowledge, have fallen greedily upon the additional fare that the prosopographic approach offers; and they have been under a constant temptation to read more into the evidence of this sort than can truly be found in it”⁵⁶.

The pages devoted to intelligence are very revealing. Elkins writes diligently but conceptually oscillates between two extremes: On the one hand, she adheres to the interpretation of Priya Satia⁵⁷ (who, in turn, is inspired by the most unreliable anticolonial thinkers, from William Blake to Mahatma Gandhi) on the other hand, she describes Rudyard Kipling and the British secret agents of his age as a group of amateurs who were romanticized as protagonists of the Great Game. Even France, Russia, and Germany would have developed more advanced intelligence technologies, while Victorian and Edwardian Britain would have turned up its nose at activities considered unbecoming for a gentleman. Her picture is a historical revisionism as bold as problematically reasoned. Indeed, the Soviet Revolution of 1917 was the detonator of a profound renewal and amplification of the world of intelligence. However, the world of propaganda and the international confrontation of the superpowers had been active and formidable for a long time before⁵⁸. It is enough to remember that some of the

most significant works and exemplifications of that intelligence's epoch, John Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps* and *Greenmantle*, were published in 1915 and 1916, well before 1917.

Elkins almost gives up the possibility of drawing reliable conclusions about its own best sources. In fact, she cites Richard Aldrich and his proper observations on the secret service archives as *distraction material*, created on purpose both to hide substantial secrets and to offer versions of the past carefully packaged⁵⁹. However, historians do not stop in front of packaged truths; instead, they follow the task of separating wheat from oil. In substance, the entire narration of intelligence and its place in British history is seen in a way that is not only belittling but misleading because it oscillates between reductionism, revisionism, and extremism. In the footsteps of Christopher Andrew⁶⁰, Elkins recognizes that recruiting academic intellectuals is part of a long English tradition. Nevertheless, she remains in the light of this elementary truth to say that this recruitment is part of a complicated chronicle. Her tale overlooks that the recruitment, tutorship, and training of intelligence personnel have been a big part of colonialism's history during that period, both for its proponents and its opponents⁶¹. One may uncover the most valuable archives and reveal previously unknown facts, but without the necessary conceptual foundation—what Gibbon referred to as “philosophic history”—those facts and archives can become misleading. In this regard, every historian's engagement with intelligence matters serves as a litmus test for their ability to distinguish between *res gestae* (the deeds themselves) and *historia rerum gestarum* (events deemed worthy of narration), a key skill of any historian, from Titus Livius and Tacitus onwards⁶².

The challenge lies not in gathering factual elements but in the intelligence historian's capacity to assign them the correct weight and interpretation. A scholar might excel in discovering critical archival documents. However, he may struggle to fully understand their significance without the conceptual tools to situate these findings within a centuries-long history—where diplomatic, intelligence, military, and practical elements have intricately intertwined.

5.

Weapons of nuclear destruction had already radically altered the theory and practice of warfare among nuclear powers. Biological warfare weapons, delicate spatial and submarine connections, global supply chains, easy cyberattacks, low-cost drones, and artificial intelligence have magnified to the extreme the vulnerability of Western societies that had already been defined as risk societies.

An all-out war is impossible, but conflicts in the grey zone between war and peace need to be regulated. The problems that emerged after September 11 are not linked to an excess of democracy: they are somewhat influenced by the international system's general unpreparedness to face the new world of security in the Third Millennium with the necessary mentality and means.

A new situation suggests that the next half-century will be the most dangerous of all time. Humans will survive it only if the age-old dream of ending war may yet come to pass. On the issues of intelligence and security, there is a need for much greater collaboration and sharp coordination at the institutional level. Almost at the end of the Anthropocene, on the brink of the hybridization of human intelligence with artificial

intelligence, it is easy to understand that many have rethought intelligence's role and geopolitical imperatives in Western history.

It would be absurd to say that the Western experience only consists of crude realism or ruthless use of intelligence. The more well-meaning Renaissance tradition constitutes a reference in the very authoritative opinion of Tom Bingham. He says that the rule of law is a concept as often used as it is poorly defined⁶³; its quintessence is in the will to regulate what Hobbes described in the wake of Machiavelli as the sphere of force and fraud. Lord Bingham concludes his magisterial volume in Siena: in front of the famous painting by Ambrogio Lorenzetti that compares bad and good government. In Lord Bingham's perspective, the best Anglophone tradition inherits the principal contents of Western political civilization, established on the moral, civic, and inclusive principles of good governance. Rule of law and rule by intelligence are two sides of the same coin. *Simul stabunt et simul cadunt*. They both support each other, and they both fall together.

As a great thinker said, England always presented itself, ever since William III, whenever it intervened, as a defender of freedom against great despots. From the Spanish Empire to the Jacobins and Napoleon, from Hitler to Stalin, Anglophone Westerners have remained faithful to the idea of facing the global struggle essentially as moralists rather than as Machiavellians⁶⁴. For some, it was just an ideology, but for others, it was a sincere ideal belief. Actual intelligence is part of our messy world, divided in half between interests and values that are often so tightly intertwined that they are challenging to unravel, even for those who have built the plot.

In gathering and analyzing critical information, intelligence addresses some of the most pressing issues of our time: climate change, the pandemic, mass migration, global economic recovery following the worst recession since the Second World War, and a range of other political, economic, and strategic issues⁶⁵. For some today, intelligence must be newly and differently understood, practiced, and studied. A society of knowledge is intrinsically incompatible with the massacres, violence, destructiveness, and stupidity of war.

For some observers, Westerners waged a Five Hundred Years' War on the rest of the world. The latter have not forgotten. Without sincere international cooperation, there is only a dire prospect of asymmetrical wars and sore conflicts. Moreover, many estimations about Western weakness are fatally flawed. In the West, there is weakness in some ways and aggressiveness in some other ways.

Now, humans see an uncharted situation unfolding before them. In an actual knowledge society, intelligence networks are exalted to the extreme. The ultimate point is that, as humans, we need today to focus on global gains, not on other nations' losses. Today, we need to focus on long-distance human gains and losses. In this new phase of humankind, intelligence structures are still necessarily linked to national interest. However, in its mission and its vision (regardless of the specialized agencies), the function of intelligence could be addressed to the interest of humankind as a whole. This had never happened before. It takes much intelligence to understand it - and a great deal of goodwill to try to carry it out.

Many of the greatest historical works in the West have been forms of a secularized version of eschatology⁶⁶. In the major Western historiographies, from

Plotinus to Meinecke, a religious spirit breathes—a religion that is at the service of humanity. When adequately understood, even intelligence is at the service of humanity—it is an integral part of humanity’s crooked timber.

Correctly understood, in its complicated history, intelligence has not been solely a matter of dirty tricks and low blows. It would be beneficial to begin studying it from a more intelligent⁶⁷ perspective, as the future demands this understanding – and, at the end of the day, everyone has the right to choose their own past.

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