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Edward Roland Sword: The Diary and Despatches of a Military Attaché in Warsaw, 1938-1939

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I know from my own research into the pre-First World War activities of the British military attachés in Berlin just how difficult it is to find archival material that illuminates the role of these elusive soldier-diplomats.⁽¹⁾ Not only did few of these individuals keep extensive collections of private papers, but the War Office, taking the view that intelligence materials dated rapidly and were consequently of only transient value, failed to appreciate the long-term historical significance of this class of official papers. Accordingly, the Army's own copies of attaché reports - which included the dockets on which General Staff officers commented upon their content and recorded the actions that they took in response to them - were rarely earmarked for archival preservation. Instead, more often than not, they were pulped when their immediate usefulness was at an end. Elizabeth Turnbull's discovery of her late father's private diaries as military attaché in Warsaw in the run up to the Second World War is, therefore, a discovery of considerable interest. While she modestly records that "the diary and notes do not constitute 'great' history" (p. 9), for many military and diplomatic historians Lieutenant-Colonel Edward Roland ('Roly') Sword's papers will, in fact, prove a fascinating addition to the documentary record. Merely by virtue of existing they plug a gap in a section of the archives that is currently all too riddled with holes.

Another aspect of the Sword papers that will make them valuable to the historian is the great variety of different source materials contained therein. This diversity has enabled Elizabeth Turnbull and her co-editor

Andrej Suchcitz to put together a volume that consists of several different elements. The main component is made up of Colonel Sword's private diary for the crucial period from 8 January 1939 through to 4 September of the same year. This is supplemented by a short retrospective document containing the Colonel's reminiscences of the social dimension to life as a service attaché at the Warsaw Embassy. There then follows some papers of a more strictly professional nature. First, there is the text of a lecture on the politico-strategic situation in Poland given by Colonel Sword in January 1939 at the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst. Then comes an additional and shorter diary of Sword's experiences during the early part of the German invasion; and, finally, there is a selection of the Colonel's official reports from 1938 and 1939 taken from the papers deposited at the Public Record Office. In addition to the primary sources, the volume begins with a useful introduction by Suchcitz that contextualizes the various documents both in general historical terms, and also, more importantly for English language readers, in relation to the extensive, but little known, Polish historical literature.

Each of the different sections in this volume offers something of value to the historian. The diary, for example, is a mine of information concerning the range of sources that were available to the attaché, the different contacts that he was able to make, and the extent to which an officer in his position was able to travel around and inspect military installations. From its pages it can be determined that Colonel Sword was able to socialize widely among the upper echelons of the Polish military establishment and that he did travel extensively through the country. It is also clear that, as a result of both of these facts, he was in a good position to make informed judgements about Polish affairs in his reports. On top of this, his diary entries make it clear that he was well integrated into the British diplomatic establishment. This was true both with respect to the Warsaw embassy - with whose members he was on close terms - as well as with the senior diplomats in London. Certainly, Sir Robert Vansittart, for instance, felt no compunction about speaking openly to Sword, as a diary entry from early January makes very clear: "3.30.p.m. call on Sir R. Vansittart. He was most outspokenly critical of Henderson, saying he had led us all down the garden path, was grievously misinformed over German intentions.. Altogether 'a bloody man' to quote Sir R.V." (p. 31). That Vansittart, the chief diplomatic advisor to the cabinet, felt able to impart derogatory comments about the ambassador in Berlin to Sword, makes clear the extent to which Sword was *persona grata* among some senior foreign service personnel. It also provides further illustration of the alienation from government policy of appeasement-skeptics like Vansittart.

The short section of reminiscences from the Warsaw Embassy is also a mine of information, albeit of a very different type. In this document the emphasis is less on the details of the various diplomatic procedures and meetings and more on the private workings of the embassy itself. Thus, in addition to pen portraits of the various members of staff, including the servants and secretarial personnel, the piece also provides amplification on the miscellanea of embassy life. Among the issues covered are the hand over arrangements that existed (or rather failed to exist) to facilitate the arrival of a new military attaché, and the living arrangements of a diplomat in Warsaw. As information on such matters is hard to come by - understandably, such minutiae rarely made it into the official record - these recollections provide a useful guide to the social history of this part of the diplomatic service.

The next section of the volume shifts the focus away from day to day occurrences and towards the actual information supplied by Colonel Sword. The first document presented here is a lecture delivered by the attaché at the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst in January 1939. Taking the form of a summary of the then-existing military-political situation in Poland, it offers an unusually clear and condensed version of the Colonel's wider ideas and, therefore, allows one to evaluate the fundamental quality of his work. Such scrutiny does Colonel Sword considerable credit. Naturally, it took no particular insight to discern, as Colonel Sword duly did, that Nazi Germany represented the major threat to Polish security in 1939 and that the Poles were neither sufficiently well prepared nor adequately equipped to meet the powerful German military machine. Nevertheless, looking past these all too readily apparent facts, Sword was conscious of the Polish determination to remedy the deficiencies in their military establishment and to do all in their power to make ready for the coming storm. As a result, he was confident of the courage, endurance and cohesion of the Polish forces and was certain that, if fighting took place on home soil, they would give a good account of

themselves (pp. 77-8). Such, of course, was to be the case in September 1939, a fact that Colonel Sword would also record in his brief notes on the Polish campaign.

The volume concludes with a useful selection of official papers taken from the surviving attaché materials in the Public Record Office. The majority of the documents come from two well-worn series within the Foreign Office papers, in particular from the political files (FO 371) and the Confidential Prints for Poland (FO 417). However, the editors have also succeeded in unearthing some despatches and telegrams from among the records of the British Military Missions in Europe (WO 202), a more obscure collection within the War Office files that could easily have been overlooked. In some small respects the various documents assembled in the final part of the book are not as illuminating as they might have been. The memoranda are, for example, reproduced without any marginalia and there is, thus, no indication as to how they were received upon their receipt in Whitehall. However, this is but a minor quibble. More important is the fact that the presence of these documents in the same volume as the Colonel's diary does provide useful opportunities for cross-referencing and this can cast some light upon the origins of particular reports. Thus, for example, the volume includes an interesting despatch from 5 April 1939, entitled 'a summary of the main military considerations of Poland's war effort in the event of a German attack' (pp. 114-8). Not only is the writing of this report mentioned in Sword's diary, but the diary also provides a guide to Sword's interlocutors in the days prior to the report, as well as indicating the establishments that he visited at that time. The background to the memorandum's information and ideas can, therefore, be reconstructed reasonably accurately, a circumstance that is all too rare with attaché reports.

Taken together, therefore, the Sword papers make it clear that Great Britain had an industrious and conscientious informant on Polish military affairs stationed in Warsaw in 1939. As his diaries make plain, Colonel Sword searched widely for information that would be useful to his superiors and was able to report widely as a result. His despatches included, among other details, information on the morale of the Polish citizenry, the ethnic and ideological cohesion of the army, and the productive capacity of the nation's military-industrial complex. This, therefore, is a useful collection that will help contribute additional details to the military and diplomatic history of the immediate run-up to the Second World War. It is worth purchasing on that basis and as an insight into the operation of the attaché service.

Notes

1. Matthew S. Seligmann, 'A View from Berlin: Colonel Frederick Trench and the Development of British Perceptions of German Aggressive Intent, 1906-1910', *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, XXIII (2000), 114-147; idem., "'A Barometer of National Confidence': a British Assessment of the Role of Insecurity in the Formulation of British Military Policy before the First World War", *English Historical Review*, CXVII (2002), 333-355.[Back to \(1\)](#)

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