

Spies in Uniform: British Military and Naval Intelligence on the Eve of the First World War

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Matthew Seligmann's *Spies in Uniform* is an attempt to understand more fully the bases of British decision-making and policy from 1900–1914 in the light of a full investigation of the reports and work of the naval and military attachés in Germany. In historiographical terms, the book falls into the school of argument that sees British foreign policy in the period as principally rationally motivated by external events and considerations of the balance of power rather than internal cultural or societal causation, for example the 'social-imperialism' often associated with German actions. The work offers a rebuttal to arguments that British actions were based on at best ignorance of—or at worst a wilful disregard for—intelligence and assessments of Germany's intentions and capabilities. Seligmann's basic view of the determinants of British policy reflects much general work on British foreign policy (1). His analysis of these sources posits three further contentions: first, that the attachés were a vital source for the analysis of German armed forces; second, they helped to emphasize the feeling of a 'German menace' in the War Office, Admiralty, and Foreign Office; and, finally, he argues that 'military and naval attachés played a dynamic and underrated role in moulding Britain's diplomatic and strategic behaviour' (p. 29).

The text opens with a discussion of the types of military and naval intelligence available to British policy makers: open-source; consuls; ad hoc visits by serving officers; and espionage. Not surprisingly, Seligmann concludes that the attachés were the most effective form of intelligence available. His investigation of the attaché sources is extremely thorough and must be applauded, and it has brought to light material which has hitherto been considered missing, or not known to exist, such as the Dumas diary. While the much-lamented 'weeding' of the files of the service ministries discussed here has destroyed many of their records, including the attaché reports, it must stand as something of an indictment that much of the material is freely available in The National Archives, in the Foreign Office files, and Admiralty library, and thus hardly 'lost' in any real

sense. Some historians have looked at certain aspects of this material. Most notably, Arthur Marder was able to see some of this material before it was destroyed, although, of course, Marder's selection must necessarily be seen through the prism of his interpretation. Chapter 1 is concerned with the 'court and social' functions of the attachés within Germany. Seligmann is clearly on his home turf as an authority on Germany, especially in highlighting that in a militaristic society with a militaristic Kaiser, the attachés' position as diplomats was necessarily heightened. The stress on *hoffähig* (behaviour appropriate to social status) and wealth of the individual attachés gives a further insight into the nature of both the Kaiser's court and the impact of cultural factors on the Edwardian diplomatic and armed services. Indeed, a certain level of personal wealth was valued more highly than fluency in German. The attachés' dual role as representatives of their service and intelligence assets as well as officials under the auspices of the Foreign Office is acknowledged and given due attention. Seligmann also notes that many of the attachés were 'high-flyers' usually possessed of a high degree of personal intelligence and distinguished service records before and after these postings. Some of the differences between the attitudes of the Army and Navy are highlighted, with the Naval attachés being given the systematic training necessary for their more technical role (p. 71). If anything, all of these features could have been further examined and their significance brought more into the subsequent analysis. The *modi operandi* of the attachés and the limitations of the sources available to them are discussed in depth: absence of espionage; importance of third parties; and so forth. Anyone wishing to understand some of the methods and limitations of intelligence acquisition during this period will find this section useful. Seligmann is successful in his objective of establishing both the credibility and accuracy of the attachés and appreciating the environment in which they operated.

The book then moves to examine the attachés' work in gathering information on personnel and matériel. Raw intelligence data, of course, presents the historian with numerous problems of how to create a narrative account and an assessment of its significance, particularly when the approach is a thematic one as largely undertaken here. The author elects to take three 'case studies' of matériel—German aviation, motor vehicles and flotilla vessels—and looks as well at personnel issues. The case studies make interesting reading and shed some light on both the technological development of the German armed forces and the nature of British responses to them. Nevertheless, the reader is, to a degree, left wondering as to the overall significance of these points. For instance, in the discussion of submarines and destroyers we are told that Henry Jackson, the Controller, and Jackie Fisher, then First Sea Lord, were both instructing the attachés to obtain information (pp. 132–33), but there is no indication as to why this was, nor what the significance was of the effectiveness of German flotilla craft in prewar building policy, strategy, and tactics (2). We are later told that the Assistant Director of Naval Construction found reports on this 'very interesting' (p. 236), but the analysis merely seeks to show that they *were* important rather than *why* they were important and what the necessary implications of the reports were. German aviation is discussed with more reference to British policy, but as motorized transport was in its infancy before 1914, it can hardly be treated with the same pertinence as German flotilla craft, or, indeed artillery, given that the latter was the decisive arm in the battlefields of 1914–1918. More central to existing literature is the fleeting reference to Dumas's acquisition of up-to-date information on German range finders in 1908 (p. 115), which is briefly mentioned at the end of the preceding chapter. It could, this reviewer would speculate, add to the 'fire-control' controversy so central to the work of Jon Sumida and John Brooks, and the intelligence assessment may be a fruitful and relatively unexplored avenue (3).

The remaining two chapters constitute the core of the argument, examining the substantial material from sources in Germany reporting the scale and nature of the threat to Britain and the extent of German Anglophobia. Seligmann shows that the attachés were generally conscious of a 'German Menace' and that their reports to London reflected this. In chapter 4, Seligmann develops the personalities and concerns of the attachés and nuances their hitherto rather anonymous reports. Colonel Trench's (1906–1910) reports are mostly absorbed in discussions of a surprise German invasion. While the genesis of Trench's own views in the South African War are traced, their overall significance is again left in a vacuum. We are only later shown the obvious link between Trench's work and policy—the fact that he was reporting on the possibility of a German invasion at the very time that the Committee of Imperial Defence was undertaking its investigations on this subject at the instigation of the pro-conscription party. Similarly, the reports of

Colonel Russell are used to portray German belligerence and menace, but they are not related to the absolutely critical changes taking place in British national strategy at the time, particularly the notorious CID meeting of 23 August 1911 and the 'continental commitment'. To some extent, these are structural problems. As 'policy' is separated at the end of the book, it is harder to see the implications of Trench's reports which were obsessed with German invasion plans. Seligmann's comment that 'the influence of military attachés did not run as far as challenging existing preconceptions at the War Office' is surely important to any historian examining the realities of the Army's, and particularly Wilson's, strategic designs (p. 231). As the author shows, the War Office ignored Trench because his warnings of invasion threatened its plans for an expeditionary force. Curiously, this point seems to challenge the overall contention that the attachés had an influential voice.

Captain Heath's (R.N.) reports open many questions regarding the Acceleration Crisis. Heath repeatedly tried to show that acceleration was possible, and, moreover, probably occurring (p. 203). This is in striking contradistinction to Paul Kennedy's and Michael Balfour's views that German acceleration had not occurred, even if it were possible (4). Seligmann's interpretation of Captain Henderson's (R.N.) attitude can be queried. Taking over as attaché in 1913, Seligmann proposes that the lack of a German menace evident in his reports can be explained by a combination of his short period in Germany, his personal problems, and the fact that London barred him from visiting dockyards (why this happened is not evident), and discounts the idea that Henderson did not perceive a German threat. While the personalities and circumstances of the individuals involved are vital, the impression here is that personality becomes important when it does not reinforce the general thesis of a German menace. There is at this point a focus on personality to the detriment of the changing strategic and military-technical context in which it operated. The evidence may or may not support this view, but it does seem a remarkable coincidence that as German naval spending started to decline with the Army laws in 1912 and 1913, the German menace—at sea if not on land—was starting to alter.

The final chapter aims to show the influence of the service attachés on the British government. Seligmann uses the various minutes and reports on the attachés' intelligence to develop the impression that they carried substantial weight and influence on policy-makers at the War Office, Admiralty, Foreign Office, and in Cabinet. This is necessary for his thesis to show that there was, in fact, intelligence demonstrating a clear threat from Germany. That the attachés were a significant source of information to the Foreign Office can hardly be doubted given this evidence, although some events such as the appointment of Goschen as ambassador to Berlin in 1908 reduced the significance of their role in this (p. 246). The reader cannot help but think that a mere ten pages devoted to the influence of the attachés on policy itself is not quite adequate, and again, due to the structure, seems divorced from discussions of the intelligence itself. The example used is airships, yet these were a relatively minor issue both before and during the war compared to, say, the Dreadnought balance.

Niall Ferguson's *The Pity of War* provides the genesis for the central argument. As thought provoking as Ferguson's book may be, its assertions are not based on examinations of primary source material (5). Seligmann also critiques Ferguson's counterfactual work regarding the danger of German hegemony (p. 261). While counterfactual conceptions can be an interesting tool, the sources used have much more valuable application to the historian interested in more conventional assessments of causality. Of course, Ferguson's popular appeal may play a role, and in this sense a response to his assertion is important and laudable. Nevertheless, the most influential analysis of British service intelligence before 1914 hitherto remains Paul Kennedy's. Kennedy examines intelligence and its relation to British naval and military planning, rather than the Foreign Office, but his approach to intelligence is more holistic. Kennedy's view that attachés 'did not penetrate far below the deliberately exposed surfaces' is seriously called into question by Seligmann's work (6). Again, the logical conclusions to this from the point of view of the Services are not examined. The direct role of the attachés is noteworthy, but their primary intelligence function was to gather technical and qualitative data on the German armed forces. There are tantalizing hints that these sources would provide at least some measure of reinterpretation.

Seligmann perhaps dismisses the importance of the consuls' role too readily. Whatever Foreign Office objections to a 'permanent and regular system' (p. 11) for collecting information, individual consuls had long

been in the pay of the Admiralty. Moreover, consuls were responsible for a significant and extremely important area of information gathering, namely the trade statistics. The importance of trade statistics in Admiralty, War Office, and British planning can hardly be overstated, given the anticipated role of blockade in British strategy vis-à-vis Germany (not to mention the other Powers), and yet they are entirely neglected. This is a significant omission given the research Avner Offer has undertaken in showing the role of trade (particularly grain) statistics in Admiralty war planning (7). In focusing solely on the attachés (and their influence in the Foreign Office) it fails to live up to the promise of the title—it is manifestly not an analysis of 'British military and naval intelligence on the eve of the First World War'. The 'machinery' of intelligence assessment in either of the services is similarly neglected and the familiar—but problematical—criticisms of Herbert Richmond of the Naval Intelligence Department repeated.

Efforts to reduce the compartmentalization of 'military', 'naval', and 'foreign-policy' history must be applauded. The foregoing concerns from the perspective of the naval-military historian are mirrored in the foreign policy direction. The absence of an examination of the role of the attachés in July 1914 is an unexplained lacuna. Without having viewed the material himself, the reviewer can only speculate that the attaché reports at this point either did not exist or have been lost. It is surprising that a text largely concerned with the determinants of British policy towards Germany before 1914 largely ignores the very events leading up to the War and the role of these intelligence sources within it otherwise. If, as Seligmann contends, that 'owing to the paucity of surviving documentation' (p. 249) the impact of intelligence on policy is difficult to establish, then we may have to conclude with disappointment that this source material can only be used in the limited ways herein. It must be said that establishing the role of intelligence in policy-making, particularly specific decisions such as a declaration of war, is never an easy task, as recent events have shown. The policy areas that are addressed here are thoroughly handled. If, however, we can trace its role in airship construction or the 1909 naval building decisions, would it be possible to trace the role of military and naval intelligence during the diplomatic decisions of July 1914?

We can be left in no doubt that the attachés were a highly important source of intelligence on Germany, and not merely in the technical domain. However, a broader view is required. British policy-makers did not need to rely solely on attaché reports to show that there was a menace coming from Germany; it was writ large in the Tirpitz plan and German Navy Laws, especially after 1905, and in the changing balance of power. Indeed, the idea of a preventive strike against Russia and consequently France and the ambition for *Weltherrschaft* runs throughout the German historiography (8). Whilst British policy-makers did not have access to the correspondence that historians enjoy, observers of Germany in various positions could see this and relied on a variety of sources (attachés included) to do so. Critically, the key dimension of the attachés in establishing the German menace—the changing size and potency of her armed forces relative to the other Powers' and the resulting impact on the balance of power—is neglected in favour of a focus on a less-tangible perception of menace, important though this may be. Quite opposite to counterfactuals, there is an underlying *telos* that pervades. That war did occur in 1914 is strikingly presaged in the attachés' belief that 1913–1915 would be a danger point for Germany relative to France and the apparently increasing power of Russia. Indeed, the view of some of the attachés that 1913–1915 was the danger period is enormously important. Why, we are left to wonder, was 1915 considered the end point of this when Russia was in all likelihood only going to become more powerful relative to Germany, not less?

There is evidently research in a wide range of primary sources, both well-known and newly-discovered official and personal papers. On the other hand, the analysis lacks a degree of engagement with the enormous secondary literature and seems to fall between two stools in its approach to the naval, military, and foreign policy literature. In only looking to Germany, and only to the attachés, the reader is disappointed by the promise of the subtitle, and it is hard to escape a feeling of narrowness of approach. The book itself is very well produced, with no obvious errors and easily-accessible footnotes. To the author's credit, many more questions are raised than it is perhaps possible to answer in one work. For example, there are some interesting instances throughout regarding the uses of the intelligence for propaganda purposes, both by the government—and inevitably Fisher—and by the attachés themselves. With the increasing stress in contemporary work on public opinion, and its role in both the naval race and the outbreak of war, this is a

facet worthy of further exploration. Further, can these sources help to explain why British deterrence of Germany failed, or was not used in the traditional way during the critical days of 1914? The main object, to show that there was intelligence indicating a 'German menace', is achieved, and we cannot doubt that the attachés played a greater and more effective part than has been acknowledged, especially in the development of this concept within the Foreign Office. This reviewer would argue that this is a necessary, but hardly a sufficient causal factor in 1914, not to mention rather nebulous. Ultimately, there is much more here than a refutation of Ferguson. Seligmann's main argument does confirm the prevailing trends in the historiography. Moreover, he shows that the attachés were and are important, and historians have too long ignored them. This work has re-opened these sources and brought them back to the fore.

Notes

1. For example, Z. S. Steiner and K. Neilson, *Britain and the Origins of the First World War*, 2nd edn. (Basingstoke, 2003), p. 3 and passim. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. The importance of the capabilities of German destroyers in British building policy was recently indicated by Professor Eric Grove in his recent talk 'The battleship revolution - technology and the evolution of the capital ship, 1887-1914: Dreadnought in context', presented at the 'Dreadnought and the Edwardian Age' Conference (9-11 February 2006, National Maritime Museum, London). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. While he does pay some attention to British assessments of the likely ranges at which the Germans intended to fight, Sumida does not give much attention to British assessments of German fire-control capability prewar, although he notes that 'Much of the Admiralty's satisfaction with the existing service system of fire control can ... be explained by their assessments of the gunnery capabilities of the German navy'. He does not list the Foreign Office or attaché reports in his bibliography (J. T. Sumida, *In Defence of Naval Supremacy: Finance, Technology and British Naval Policy, 1889–1914* (Abingdon, 1989), pp. 252–253). Interestingly, Sumida is critical of an over-reliance on intelligence by the Admiralty (J. T. Sumida 'The quest for reach', in *Tooling for War: Military Transformation in the Industrial Age*, ed. S. D. Chiabotti (Chicago, 1996), p. 81). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. P. Kennedy 'Great Britain before 1914', in *Knowing One's Enemies: Intelligence Assessment Before the Two World Wars*, ed. E. R. May (Princeton, 1984), p. 180. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. See also J. Winter, review of *The Pity of War* by N. Ferguson, *Reviews in History*, May 1999 <<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/paper/ferguson.htm>> [2]. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Kennedy, 'Great Britain before 1914', p. 182. [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. A. Offer, *The First World War: An Agrarian Interpretation* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 233–243, esp. p. 240. [Back to \(7\)](#)
8. J. C. G. Röhl, 'Germany', in *Decisions for War 1914*, ed. K. M. Wilson (1995), p. 31 and passim. [Back to \(8\)](#)

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