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## INTELLIGENCE IN WAR: KNOWLEDGE OF THE ENEMY FROM NAPOLEON TO AL-QAEDA

Intelligence agencies are under criticism. They failed to predict the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the rise of fundamentalist Islam, the September 11 2001 attacks on the US, and they may have over-estimated Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. Are they worth all the money spent on them?

Sir John Keegan, military historian and defence editor of Britain's Daily Telegraph, is not so sure. Even if an agency has foreknowledge of, say, an impending attack, this is no guarantee of protection. Only force really counts. Knowledge of what the enemy can do and what it intends to do is never enough to ensure security. There also has to be the power and will to resist. No matter how good the intelligence is, intelligence alone will not win a campaign.

During the 1991 Iraq War, the CIA complained to President Bush that he was not reading their intelligence material. He replied that the CIA material arrived a day late – whereas he could watch CNN on television and be kept informed instantly. This is “open source” intelligence – material that is available to the general public – and it may be sufficient to guide a president.

The official form of “intelligence” may be over-rated in its importance, as well as late in arriving. The intelligence agencies can claim some major successes (such as the British and Americans breaking the German and Japanese codes in World War II) but these are few and far between.

The limitations on intelligence can be seen in each of the five stages through which it evolves. First, there is the acquisition of it; it has to be collected. This could be “electronic intelligence”, such as listening to the radio transmissions of the other side. For example, the CIA (via Pine Gap in central Australia) listened to Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan talk to his mother in Saudi Arabia over his mobile telephone. This was a wonderful technical achievement but it never picked up any information about his impending US attacks.

There is also “human intelligence”, with humans spying on the other side. This is the glamorous side of espionage so loved by fiction writers. But in reality it has not been as helpful as the fiction writers suggest. Spying on communications seems throughout history to be the more important form of intelligence work.

The second stage is delivering the information back to the potential user. Again, this is often more successful in fiction than in real life, where there are many problems in transmission.

For example, the US had broken the Japanese naval codes and so were able to listen in to news of the impending Japanese on Pearl Harbour. Unfortunately, so much intelligence was being gathered that the staff were overwhelmed and it was not until September 1945 (a month after the war ended) that all the intelligence messages were decrypted.

The third stage is acceptance of intelligence by one's own side. We now know that the CIA agents in the field in the Vietnam War kept warning Washington that the US could not win the war. But the "official view" from Washington was that the war could be won. Therefore the intelligence was doctored as it moved up the chain of command, so that by the time it reached the White House the intelligence was far more optimistic – but very inaccurate.

Another example comes from Stalin's desire to believe that the Soviet Union would not be attacked by Germany. He did a deal with Hitler in 1939, just before the beginning of the war, which relieved Hitler from fears of an attack from the Soviet Union on the eastern front while he attacked France and Britain in the west.

In the middle of 1941, Hitler was in control of France and had given up his attempt to invade Britain. He was ready to take on the Soviet Union. Churchill (relying on intelligence from the British code-breakers) warned Stalin of the impending German attack. Stalin refused to believe him. Richard Sorge, a German journalist based in Tokyo, was a Soviet spy and he gave Stalin the exact date of the attack (June 22). Stalin ignored him as well. The Germans attacked and made a great deal of progress - before becoming bogged down in the winter.

Some of the German generals, ironically, said later that if only they knew just how bad a Soviet winter could be they would not have launched the attack. That information was not a secret. It was "open source" intelligence available to anyone who studied Soviet geography or who knew Russian history and the defeat of Napoleon in 1812 by the Russian winter.

Fourth, there is interpretation of the intelligence. The material arrives piece by piece and it has to be assembled. Ultimately, the assembly of a complete picture may require a commander to make an inspired guess, which may or may not be correct.

Finally, there is the implementation of intelligence. There is no such thing as the golden secret, the piece of pure intelligence, which will resolve all doubt and guide a general or admiral to an infallible solution of his operational problem.

These two stages may be seen in the way that the British code-breakers were spot on in predicting German plans to attack Crete in World War II but their accuracy did not save the island. Crete is the fourth largest island in the Mediterranean and it closes off the southern exit from the Aegean.

Hitler could have ignored the Allied control of Crete and assembled his forces to attack the Soviet Union in June. But Goering had created a parachute division and he wanted to show off how good it was. Hitler grudgingly agreed to the attack. Crete, with its long narrow shape, would oblige the Allied defenders to disperse their forces and so create an opportunity for a concentrated surprise invasion by the paratroopers. But the British code-breakers worked out how and when the attack would occur in May 1941.

However, the Allied commander, General Bernard Freyberg VC, a World War I New Zealand hero, did not accept the intelligence and dispersed his forces, including being ready for a seaborne attack (which never took place). The 22,040 German soldiers were outnumbered by 42,460 British Commonwealth and Greek soldiers, as well as the courageous Cretans who fought back with whatever weapons they could find (and paid a terrible price in reprisals when the Germans eventually took control of the island). The Germans also paid a horrible price in casualties because of the severity of the fighting. Hitler decided that the parachute division would never again be deployed in such an attacking role.

Freybourg should have been able to organize a victory. Intelligence is only as good as the use made of it. The British code-breakers had given him accurate information. But Freybourg was convinced that the parachute attack was only a prelude to a later seaborne invasion and gave the Germans their window of opportunity.

Sir John Keegan writes that it has become standard thinking that intelligence is the necessary key to success in military operations. But it may be that intelligence, while generally necessary, is not a sufficient means to victory. Victory in war is the result of a fight, and in combat willpower always counts for more than foreknowledge.

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John Keegan [Intelligence in War: Knowledge of the Enemy from Napoleon to A-Qaeda](#), London: Hutchinson, 2003.