

H-Net Reviews

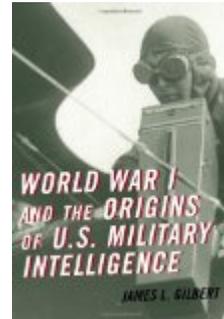
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

James L. Gilbert. *World War I and the Origins of U.S. Military Intelligence*. Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2012. Illustrations. x + 245 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8108-8459-5.

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Military intelligence, as a strictly informal phenomenon, has been a part of American military history since the very beginnings of the Republic. In fact, the very first pages of this book are devoted to a brief examination of intelligence gathering by U.S. military personnel in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Yet until World War I, the U.S. Army had no formal institutions that conducted intelligence gathering in a systematic and bureaucratized way. James L. Gilbert's book is an institutional history of the Military Intelligence Section (MIS), established in 1917, later named the Military Intelligence Division (MID), and of the two most important men who developed it, future Generals Dennis E. Nolan and Ralph van Deman.

The MID was not entirely without precedent. An organization called the Military Information Division had existed in the Philippines since its acquisition at the end of the Spanish-American War of 1898. The Military Information Division focused strictly on local problems, including map making and identifying and gathering information on local guerillas. A more national organization—the Signal Corps—existed in both the Union and the Confederate armies during the Civil War, although it was limited to communications and, later on, aviation. (Interestingly, Gilbert notes that the Confederate version was more similar to the MIS in terms of scope and intent than the Union one.)

It was the outbreak of World War I that forced senior military officers to reconsider the importance of intelligence. Immediately prior to the war, Brigadier General Hunter Liggett “wrote the most amazingly short-sighted proposal to his superiors. In it, he recommended the elimination of attaches” throughout Europe (p. 10).

These attaches were vital as the only army officers with extensive international experience. Fortunately, wiser heads eventually prevailed (although establishing and maintaining MIS would remain an extremely difficult and laborious task). MIS, developed as a subunit under the General Staff, would not only provide intelligence for American commanders overseas, but help in the fight against sabotage by agents of the Central powers in the United States as well.

As an organizational history, Gilbert's book is superb. He follows both Nolan and Deman throughout their careers in intelligence—Deman as the head of MIS, Nolan as the American Expeditionary Force's G2, or head of Intelligence. At times, the book is dense, overly filled with institutional minutiae. This excess of detail sometimes clouds important issues of context, while leaving other matters underexamined. Gilbert discusses Nolan's task shortly after the American entry into WWI in setting up G2. He was given two options: the British or the French system. Gilbert does not delve into much detail on what the two systems entailed, stating only that the British “were operating on foreign soil and thus faced many of the same challenges” and that “the French operations dominated their intelligence,” while operations and intelligence within the British were more equal (p. 56). In addition, the use of specialized terms, such as “operations” and its distinction from “intelligence,” could be problematic for readers not already familiar with intelligence jargon.

Where the book really shines is in the discussion of counterespionage within the United States, which Gilbert says was “without a doubt, MID's greatest contribution” (p. 113). He lays out a number of sabotage plots that MID

agents, many of them ex-policemen, defeated or even prevented. This particular aspect of World War I is far less known than the more traditional histories of combat overseas.

While perhaps not suitable for the general public, as

the author assumes a great deal of knowledge on the part of the reader, it is an excellent resource for more seasoned historians or for graduate students who already have a strong grasp of World War I and the basics of intelligence gathering and dissemination.

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