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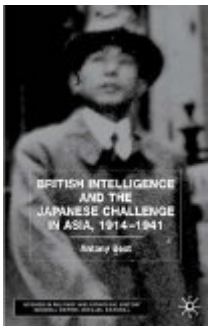

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The Roots of Intelligence Failure

Antony Best, Lecturer in International History at the London School of Economics, has written a first-rate monograph documenting the successes and failures of British intelligence policy in Asia in the three decades leading up to World War II. In the course of this relatively short book, the author highlights three main themes to show how intelligence "contributed to the process of Anglo-Japanese alienation and eventually to the outbreak of the Pacific War" (p. 10).

First and foremost is the issue of race, specifically British ethnocentrism and racial bias. Best explains that intelligence helped to build up a British image of Japan that often bordered on caricature, stressing supposed "national characteristics" in which "Japan was compared with an idealized view of what the British services were capable of achieving" (p. 194). "[R]acial difference [acted] as a comfort to the British, who could relax in the ethnocentric knowledge that they were physically and culturally superior" (p. 89).

The British were occasionally willing to show the Japanese grudging respect, for example praising their efficiency, and their martial spirit. On the whole, however, Japan's military capabilities were consistently undervalued. Best draws on some truly remarkable quotes to make his case that "assessments of Japan's military power" were "strongly influenced by racial truisms about the Japanese. The most prevalent was the persistence of the belief that the Japanese as a race suffered from 'slow mental adaptability'" (p. 88). For example, Brigadier-General C. R. Woodroffe observed Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) annual maneuvers in 1919 and concluded "[t]o anyone familiar with the national psychology, it is doubtful whether the Japanese will ever become a first-class Military pilot" (p. 43). Another observer declared "the principal obstacle to progress would appear to be the narrow conservatism of the Japanese military mind" (p. 86). Observing the conduct of the Japanese army outside of Shanghai in December 1937, one British officer concluded "the Japanese Army as a fighting force cannot be considered a first-class Army ... we need not really feel any anxiety in the event of war with Japan" (p. 144).

In the end, intelligence did not shake ethnocentric attitudes and often tended to reinforce them. Best deems these racial attitudes to have been "the one overriding fatal flaw" that would "have hampered the British assessment of the strategic threat to its interests in East Asia" (p. 194). The author makes this case repeatedly and persuasively.

However, there is sufficient evidence in this volume to draw the conclusion that other factors were more instrumental in the British intelligence failures of the 1920s and 1930s. Best develops two other prominent themes. First, he describes how the intelligence apparatus in Asia expanded slowly during the period, but this growth was not commensurate with the threat; instead, the process of collecting and analyzing intelligence was consistently deprived of needed resources. These limited intelligence resources were then frequently diverted from the main object of Japan, especially in observing the activities of the Comintern and other agents of the Soviet Union, and in monitoring anti-British sentiment in India, and other parts of Asia.

In the area of limited resources, Best gives ample attention to the persistent language barrier that was a crucial constraint on intelligence. The language officer program was repeatedly shortchanged. It was difficult to recruit qualified officers for the duty and turnover rates were very high. Throughout the period studied in this book, there were simply too few professionals trained in Japanese to serve as leaders of the intelligence organizations as well as too few translators. The parallels to the present day are striking: various U.S. intelligence agencies allegedly lacked interpreters fluent in Arabic as well as other Middle Eastern and West Asian languages to translate electronic intercepts that might have provided warning prior to the September 11 attacks.[1]

The third major theme of the book, which also has particular resonance in the post-September 11 era, is the degree to which bureaucratic infighting and parochialism worked to the detriment of intelligence collection and analysis. The creation of the Department of Homeland Security was driven primarily by the need for better information-sharing among intelligence agencies, with the chief concern in the near term being to overcome bureaucratic inertia. Best provides many examples of how bureaucratic inertia and infighting had a profoundly negative effect on British policy. He also documents instances of bureaucratic silos hindering information exchange.

Best draws on an impressive array of sources, especially materials from British archives. He makes particularly effective use of intercepted foreign diplomatic correspondence, the so-called Blue Jackets or BJs, that were a key asset for British intelligence. But Best has an appropriately sanguine view of the limitations of primary source materials. He explains that many materials were permanently destroyed while others remain closed, for example the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) files. Further, he concedes that raw intelligence alone does not tell the full story for "it is difficult to see how policy-makers interpreted this material." Nonetheless, he argues that "there are enough records in existence to give us some idea of how intelligence influenced policy and policy-makers" (p. 10).

The work is comprehensive, detailed, and generally well-organized. Best begins by tracing the origins of Anglo-Japanese amity, formalized in the Anglo-Japanese alliance of January 1902. He then explains how a growing recognition of clashing interests, and persistent racial undertones, led to a steady erosion in relations between the two powers. These racial concerns manifested themselves in frequent references to a "Yellow Peril" or to a pan-Asian movement, with fears of Japanese provocateurs stirring up trouble in areas of traditional British interest--especially India, Hong Kong, and Singapore--as well as areas of concern for other European powers, such as Southeast Asia and Indonesia.

Best moves away from Japan for nearly two chapters to show that British intelligence was focused on the Comintern and the Soviet Union during the 1920s. This focus led the British to miss signs of Japan's growing restlessness, explained by Best as that nation's response to the Soviets, and to political instability in China. During this time, in particular, the SIS was badly shorthanded trying to watch the Soviets, the Chinese, and the Japanese.

Intelligence assessments in the 1930s were founded upon a continuing reliance upon ethnocentric views. The British characterized the Japanese as cautious and calculating. Further, many believed that Japan was bogged down in China and therefore unable to take the offensive militarily in other areas. Accordingly, the Japanese threat was deemed to be largely bluff and the British adopted a policy of strengthening China, even though this entailed a risk of increasing Japanese antagonism. "From here," Best concludes, "it was but a short step to the policies pursued in 1941" (p. 159).

Into the late 1930s, British intelligence deemed the Japanese to be a cautious power, content to "sit on the fence" without provoking the British (p. 170). These inaccurate intelligence assessments played a key role in the development of policy because it encouraged the British to believe that the Japanese could be deterred from engaging in further aggression. The reinforcement of Malaya, the tightening of economic sanctions, and a policy of propaganda intended to discredit Germany, were all adopted on the assumption that deterrence would be effective. As late as October 1941, a leading British analyst declared that "[t]he Japanese are undoubtedly cautious and proceed by gradual steps" (p. 182).

Best is appropriately cautious in assessing the long-term effects of flawed intelligence on policymaking. "[A] more enlightened intelligence image of Japan might have led to a less confrontational, more flexible policy being implemented," Best argues, "and ... in that case war might have been averted. However, this is to enter into the wild alternative universe of counterfactual history, and is not in the end as important as understanding why the intelligence failure of 1941 took place" (p. 187).

There was a persistent pattern of underestimating Japanese abilities, and much of the blame falls at the feet of British intelligence. Arguing that British intelligence was "gravely at fault" (p. 191), Best takes issue with Richard Aldrich, who defended the Joint Intelligence Sub-Committee (JIC).[2] Best concedes, however, that both the analysts and the policymakers were at fault. Intelligence did not shake racial and cultural preconceptions, and the consumers of intelligence were not persuaded by the occasional intelligence estimates that highlighted the Japanese threat, or that predicted Japanese success against the British.

Perhaps the best single characterization of this breakdown on both sides of the intelligence chain is the following observation relating to the Japanese attack on Kota Bharu on December 7, 1941, an attack that caught British officials completely by surprise. Prior to this attack, the Japanese threat to Malaya was completely misunderstood, a striking intelligence failure. Best writes, "The picture that emerges of Malaya in 1941 is ... one in which the FECB [Far East Combined Bureau] did not speak with a clear enough voice to an audience that was already profoundly deaf" (p. 190).

This book is not suitable for all readers. Best presumes that the reader will have a working knowledge of events in Asia in the early twentieth century. He also assumes that readers will be familiar with common abbreviations and acronyms. His frequent use of such shorthand is a modest distraction that is alleviated somewhat by a list of abbreviations at the beginning of the book.

This is not a comprehensive view of the range of factors contributing to Britain's failure to predict Japanese actions in Asia in December 1941. It

is only natural for readers to be appalled by British obtuseness, but a fine line separates great failures and great successes, and there does seem to be room for giving credit where credit is due. It is certainly true that the British failed to identify Japanese intentions and capabilities, but the Japanese should be credited with effectively concealing this information from the outside world. Further, for all of his talk of British ethnocentrism, it might be equally interesting to read the comments of the Japanese relative to the British. One suspects that the British were not alone in underestimating potential adversaries.

These are minor criticisms, however. Antony Best has produced a tightly-argued monograph addressed to a crucial historical topic that will be valuable to scholars with an understanding of and an interest in intelligence history. This book will also be of use to diplomatic historians seeking to broaden their understanding of the origins of World War II in Asia.

Notes

[1]. See Anthony Shadid, "US Boosts Funds for Strategic Language Study," ***Boston Globe***, 26 February 2002, A1.

[2]. Richard J. Aldrich, ***Britain and the Intelligence War Against Japan, 1941-1945: The Politics of Secret Service*** (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).