

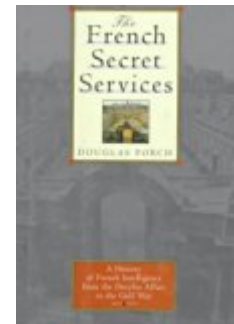
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Douglas Porch.** *The French Secret Services: From the Dreyfus Affair to the Gulf War.* New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1995. xiv + 623 pp. \$32.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-374-15853-8.

Reviewed by John F. V. Keiger (University of Salford, Manchester, UK)  
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## The Second Oldest Profession

The role of intelligence services in the national and international politics of modern powers has been described as the “missing dimension” (C. M. Andrew and D. N. Dilks, eds., *The Missing Dimension: Governments and Intelligence Communities in the Twentieth Century* [London, 1984]). Accounts of intelligence activities used to be consigned to journalists, novelists, and former agents in pursuit of sensation, entertainment, and self-justification rather than rigorous analysis of international relations. But since the 1970s the study of intelligence has become a growth industry in the academic world, spawning journals and hundreds of scholarly works. Nearly all of the major powers of the twentieth century have acquired an academic history of their intelligence communities, the United States, Soviet Union, and Great Britain being the subject of several. France has been an exception. A very useful bibliography of the French intelligence services published in 1994, but not cited by Douglas Porch (P. Morris and M. Cornick, *The French Secret Services* [Oxford, 1993]), demonstrated the absence of any scholarly general study.

The reasons for this lacuna are numerous. There is a relatively small academic community in France working on international history in general and very little interest in intelligence studies in particular (though this is beginning to change with the establishment of a post-graduate intelligence seminar at the new university of Marne-la-Vallee near Paris under the direction of Admiral Pierre Lacoste, former head of France’s foreign intelligence service at the time of the *Rainbow Warrior* affair in 1985). Moreover, anglophone academic intelligence

specialists, preoccupied with the large source materials in English, tend to dominate the field, while there are serious restrictions placed by the French authorities on access to archival files dealing with intelligence (though studies of the KGB and British intelligence have partly short-circuited similar restrictions by using U.S. intelligence agency archives as source material).

The absence of any scholarly history of the French intelligence community is surprising given France’s important role in international relations in the twentieth century. It is all the more so, as Porch points out, when one considers the remarkable turmoil that has characterised French society from war and invasion to political fragmentation and “... presented secret service organisations with extraordinary opportunities for partisan activity,” not to mention “the tradition of governments and police spying on their own citizens” (p. xi). Porch’s stated aim is to chronicle the development of the French secret services in the modern era and ask some fundamental questions about what France expected and expects from them. As with any serious study of intelligence agencies, the key question is to determine the extent to which intelligence, once gathered, was fed into the policy-making process, and from there to assess its role and influence in the state. What makes the French case of particular interest is the way it differs from the “Anglo-Saxon” model of intelligence. The latter, claims Porch, assigns domestic intelligence to the realm of police work, rather than to “intelligence” in the pure sense of a group or bureaucracy that informs government of internal threats. In France “the fear of internal subversion, aided by outside influ-

ence, was the first preoccupation of intelligence” (pp. 20-21), helping to explain why the frontier between intelligence, domestic surveillance, and counter-intelligence has always been more blurred in France than in Great Britain or the United States.

Although the French intelligence community predates the Franco-Prussian war, it is in the years following France’s defeat in 1870 that great efforts were made to establish a modern service. This is the starting point of Porch’s history. But obsession with Germany led to the discreditable role of the French counter-espionage service in the Dreyfus Affair. Discovery of their nefarious activities in one of the most significant scandals of modern French history was to leave a legacy of distrust from which the French intelligence community has never fully recovered. All governments, and those of the left in particular, have entertained an uneasy and ambiguous relationship with the intelligence services. This distrust has been perpetuated by the fact that foreign intelligence has been dominated by the military, unlike in their Anglo-Saxon counterparts. It is not conducive to good intelligence practice, given the notions of hierarchy and obedience that prevail in the military over independence of mind, scepticism, and critical thinking. Neither has the military’s image in French society been respected among politicians and the public, for reasons ranging from military defeats to political intervention in French domestic affairs, and the poor image has rubbed off on the foreign intelligence services.

Judged superficially on results, one could say that the foreign intelligence services have performed badly in not being able to predict the two greatest French military disasters of the twentieth century—the direction and force of the German offensives in 1914 and 1940. Of course, as Porch points out, this is an unfair means of assessing their performance, for, as any student of intelligence knows, the problem lies not only in the gathering of intelligence, but just as important, in its interpretation by decision makers. More often than not, intelligence information is accepted when it confirms preconceived ideas rather than overturns them. The French intelligence services did present evidence of German offensive plans in 1914 and 1940 to the decision makers, who chose to ignore the information. Undeniably, this is part of a vicious circle, for if there had been greater respect for the French intelligence community, then arguably there would have been greater readiness to accept the reliability of information gathered by it.

Porch has written a long book of some 500 pages of

text, which has allowed him to describe in a chronological framework many of the peculiar characteristics of the French secret services. These include the ferocious rivalry between the myriad official intelligence organisations, especially domestic and foreign agencies; and the additional hostility between official and ad hoc parallel agencies established, especially under the Fifth Republic, by presidents suspicious of the partisanship of the official services. Then there is the almost reflex reaction of the French services to covert “action,” a legacy of the Resistance; and the probable high level of penetration of the French services by, in particular, communist foreign governments. The latter probability is strong, given the prominence and respect for the French Communist Party, recently supported by revelations about former socialist Defence Minister Charles Hernu’s KGB activity. And finally there has been the extraordinary turnover in intelligence chiefs over the last fifteen years. One is constantly drawn toward the banal remark that one gets the intelligence services one deserves, but a marginally more helpful comment would be that the French secret services mirror French society.

Oddly enough, Porch’s book mirrors the strengths and weaknesses of the French secret services themselves. He has a tendency to be uncritical of his sources, which of necessity, given the lack of official documentation, rely heavily on memoirs and journalistic accounts, but which are insufficiently corroborated by scholarly studies of the political and military background to events (for example, on the myth of the Resistance, there is no mention of secondary authorities such as Robert Paxton or Henri Rousso [pp. 262 et seq.]). This is redolent of the hearsay and unsubstantiated data collected by the domestic intelligence services, most notably the *Renseignements généraux*, on France’s own citizens. Porch tends to use sources when they confirm his pre-conceived ideas and reject the same ones when they conflict with them (for example, pp. 204, 282, 437, 484). He has a tendency to shoot from the hip with explanations, without having fully analysed all the secondary material on the subject, such as the reasons for Mitterrand’s hesitations over intervention in the Gulf War (pp. 492-93), mirroring the French services’ propensity for action above analysis. In the case of the French secret services this led to the disastrous bungling in the sinking of the *Rainbow Warrior* in 1985; in the case of Porch this leads to some rather idiosyncratic interpretations, such as the carnage at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 being largely due to French desires “to maintain control of the opium harvest” (p. 319), something not mentioned in the usual serious secondary sources, few of which Porch

bothers to cite.

Of course this may be an interpretation that the “missing dimension” of intelligence reveals to be true, but just as French decision makers’ were sceptical of iconoclastic intelligence theories from a poorly esteemed intelligence service, one harbours doubts when the author shows little sign of having exhausted the existing secondary works and relies heavily on somewhat questionable journalists like Lucien Bodard. Neither is he correct in his interpretation of some of the recognised authorities he does cite on other issues, such as his assumption that Robert J. Young analyses French society’s problems in the 1930s in terms of “decadence” (p. 144), which is the J.-B. Duroselle, not the Young, interpretation.

Despite a number of failings there is a good deal to be applauded in this book insofar as it is a useful history of the French secret services as a whole and has no competitor. It is wide ranging, racily written, well organised with useful summaries and a good, if repetitive, conclusion. The book is also accessible to the nonspecialist reader. Greater rigour in method and scholarly objectivity with regard to sources would have given it more authority and probably a greater shelf-life.

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