

# H-Diplo

## H-Diplo Article Reviews

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**R. Gerald Hughes. "Of Revelatory Histories and Hatchet Jobs: Propaganda and Method in Intelligence History." *Intelligence and National Security* 23:6 (2008): 842-877. DOI: 10.1080/02684520802591459. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02684520802591459>**

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The appearance of the blockbuster book *Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA* by Washington Post reporter Tim Weiner, has provided a valuable "teachable moment" for historians.<sup>1</sup> Gerald Hughes' article shows us that this should have been an obvious fact. Blowing away the smoke surrounding Weiner's book and its critical reception, Hughes shines a light on the real differences between academic history on the one hand and popular or journalistic history on the other. At the same time he provides a useful warning to intelligence historians and, indeed, all historians who wish to be relevant to the real world.<sup>2</sup>

Hughes' bracing article proposes to explore certain methodological, epistemological, and presentational issues with regard to intelligence studies. He does this by dissecting—disboweling might be a better metaphor—Weiner's book. He makes a convincing case that Weiner has misappropriated the trappings of academic work in a quest for sensation and sales. At the same time, Hughes argues for accessibility in language and the avoidance of jargon, skills which good journalists such as Weiner have in abundance.

Weiner's thesis is that the CIA has been an unmitigated failure in its most important mission: informing American decisionmakers about what is happening around the world. His book met with many favorable, even ecstatic, reviews that highlighted the bold nature of his thesis and emphasized how Weiner went above and beyond in examining an

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA* (New York: Doubleday, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Full disclosure: the present reviewer worked for five years at CIA and some eight years elsewhere in the U.S. Intelligence Community. During the research phase of his book, Tim Weiner called me to ask some questions about one of my previously published works in American intelligence history.

enormous number of primary source documents and conducting a great number of interviews with participants. His reviewers also applauded the fact that unlike most reporters today, he was only willing to use interview materials when his sources had been willing to speak on the record. The generally rapturous reception that this book received from professional reviewers is reflected in the fact that the only negative review to which Hughes is able to give any serious attention is that of Nicholas Dujmovic who, predictably, wrote a scathing piece about the book for the CIA's in-house journal, *Studies in Intelligence*.<sup>3</sup>

Hughes starts by observing that intelligence studies has “become notable for a process of intellectual cross-fertilisation, whereby historians, strategists, political scientists and others write on both historical and contemporary case studies, with all contributing to what one might term both ‘theories’ and ‘methodologies’ of intelligence.” (843) He is correct in pointing to the diversity of the field. This observation is sound -- as a quick consideration of such names as Christopher Andrew, John Ferris, Michael Handel, Robert Jervis, James Wirtz, Jennifer Sims, James Bamford, and Matthew Aid will show. However, Hughes urges scholars of intelligence to pay particular attention to the trends in the theory, methodology, and presentation of history. He also urges intelligence scholars to avoid the jargon and inaccessible language of political scientists and write accessibly, a skill which he says historians have typically exhibited.

The topic of “accessible” writing brings Hughes to Tim Weiner and *Legacy of Ashes*. He uses Weiner’s “journalistic” approach as his leading example in a discussion of the distinction between “popular” and “academic” history. Hughes argues, with devastating effectiveness throughout, that “the central failing of Weiner’s book is bias.” (861) In fairness, Hughes notes that nobody is unbiased, but Weiner’s tragic flaw, he suggests, is a belief in his own objectivity. In effect, Weiner was seemingly unaware that the very act of selecting which documents to use and which to lay aside inevitably introduces some form of bias. Hughes also points to a related problem. Weiner makes a virtue of the fact that his history is almost entirely based on primary sources, particularly archival documents. In doing so, the work falls prey to the bias often inherent in documents. It is not necessarily the case that “the truth resides in the documents.” (850) In particular, Weiner seems unaware of or unconcerned with Richard Aldrich’s warning against viewing official archives as an ‘analogue of reality’. After all, government bureaucrats not only decide what goes in the documents they write, but which documents get preserved in the archives. (Aldrich, of course, was speaking specifically of intelligence archives, but there is no reason why this should not be a problem with all archives.) With no little irony, Hughes notes that “some observers have even charged that Weiner’s extensive use of CIA material actually makes him too pro-establishment for the task.” (854)

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<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, the 161 reader reviews to date on Amazon.com are decidedly mixed in their opinions.

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This is but one of many places where Hughes points out that Weiner's work ignores historical work done by others and suffers as result. (In a memorable phrase, Hughes refers to "Historiography: The 'Missing Dimension' of Popular History." (856) One cannot help but wonder whether Weiner, for all of his obvious knowledge about intelligence, would have caught the joke)<sup>4</sup> By ignoring the work of academic historians, Weiner is able to set up and then thoroughly destroy numerous straw men. This problem is most visible in Weiner's claim that his book destroys the myth of CIA competence and omnipotence. While uninformed laymen—such as those appalled that the CIA could not assassinate al Qaida's leaders, and conspiracy-mongers in such places as Latin America, the Middle East, and Russia—may still believe in CIA's omnipresence and omnipotence, Hughes points out that this has scarcely been a characteristic of academic writing about the CIA. Indeed, "Weiner's book makes only minimal reference to the interpretations of other historical accounts which opine that the CIA is, historically speaking, something of a flawed organization." (852)

Hughes also usefully points out that adherence by popular historians and journalists to academic standards of primary source research and citation, combined with the accessible prose that such writers tend to utilize, can generate a problem. The result often is works that can obscure the difference between academic histories on the one hand and popular histories or even journalism on the other and mislead the public about what scholarly history is. In fact, Hughes rightly points out that academic history and journalism are two different, if somewhat related professions, each with differing methods and different roles to play in a liberal society.

Hughes cites the American journalist and author Evan Thomas to the effect that the "mainstream media" is, in fact, biased, though not ideologically so. Rather it is biased toward conflict. Journalists, Thomas says, "share a yen for scandal." (851) They also share a lust for the scoop, a lust to reveal that which has been secret, and they share a desire to expose incompetence, stupidity, and malfeasance. These are highly functional attributes for journalists in a society that wishes to be free and it seems clear that Weiner, being the good reporter that he is, certainly displayed this unconscious bias. Of course, there is much to work with in the history of the CIA, a large organization that has existed for 60 years for the purpose of doing difficult things. Time and again Weiner portrays the CIA as being populated either by fools or knaves. For instance, he blames the CIA and MI-6-inspired coup in 1953 that restored the Shah to power for the much later rise of Khomeini and the installation of a radical Islamic regime in Iran. In other words, the CIA, Weiner would have us believe, was so stupid that it created one of America's greatest enemies.

Weiner's critique is common despite being intellectually unsound. Faced with undesirable political developments, citizens often ask in righteous indignation, "didn't

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<sup>4</sup> Christopher Andrew and David Dilks, eds., *The Missing Dimension: Governments and Intelligence Communities in the Twentieth Century* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1984). Andrew and Dilks' volume served as a clarion call to which numerous scholars have responded.

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they know what they were doing?” Well, no, “they” did not know back then because the future had not yet happened. (Even that formulation hints at a degree of causality that is probably not warranted. Yoda’s words in *The Empire Strikes Back* are apropos here: “Always in motion is the future.”) However, were Weiner to take this simple fact into account he “would make the book’s analysis of American relations with Iran in the Cold War rather less dramatic, and therefore less marketable, by virtue of being less judgmental.” (849)

Serious historians, of course, do not bury themselves in dusty archives in order to have a scoop or uncover some salacious conflict. Rather, they work to discover how the world works. Often, the world works in very mundane ways that would not sell a single newspaper. Nevertheless, historians prefer that their works are read and often they hope to have an impact on public policy. Here the academic historians do have something to learn from the journalists and the popular historians whose living depends on accessible writing and the absence of jargon. Hughes concludes that a melding of solid historical method, including the appropriate use of previous scholarship, with the good writing that characterizes high-level journalism may allow intelligence historians to “better inform debates on intelligence across the globe” and fight against those who would use history as a branch of propaganda. (863)

Hughes’ article, combined with an excerpt from Weiner’s book and a couple of representative reviews, would provide excellent fodder for discussion in a university history course. Academic historians will find the article a fascinating read but it should only serve as an example of something that they already know. That said, if they take Hughes’ admonition about the importance of writing accessibly to heart, perhaps academic historians will be able to position themselves to review the next book of this type for the mainstream media. Such an eventuality would benefit both the profession and the greater society.

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