



A Guide to the History of Intelligence in the Age of Empires, 1500–1800

by Douglas L. Wheeler, PhD

Although spying is older than war, the systematic employment of spies and permanent intelligence services came only after 1850. Before the technological and political revolutions of the 1800s transformed the world, leaders and commanders sought intelligence for traditional purposes and in traditional ways: in times of peace banks, insurance companies and merchants sought information to protect or expand their investments; in war, scouts probed the enemy, and soldiers and sailors intercepted messages, interrogated prisoners, found documents and sent out spies to discover the enemy's strength and plans. Like chess players, diplomats sought warning of their adversaries' strategies and next moves. Kings and princes dispatched spies in order to protect their royal lives and kingdoms.

The period of 1500 to 1800 was a time of transition from the late Renaissance to early modern history, from the age of sail to coal-powered steamships. In 1500 in the West, while monarchs and diplomats employed spies, there were no permanent intelligence services. By 1800, as the West entered early stages of the industrial revolution, warfare underwent important changes in tactics, weaponry and planning, and armed forces, and foreign ministries toyed with the notion of creating permanent intelligence units.

The secret arts of spying were nurtured more extensively and had an ancient history in the East, especially in India and China. In India's Moghul empire, during its zenith from the 1550s to 1750, for example, emperors used intelligence services widely both in war and peace. Moghul emperors such as Akbar, Jahangir, Shah Jahan, creator of the Taj Mahal, and Aurangzeb, sponsored personal spy corps with networks of scavengers, mendicants, merchants and ascetics who reported on conspiracies and plots.

During the Renaissance and later as the Ottoman

empire reached its apogee in the 16th and 17th centuries, various developments led to a greater emphasis on intelligence. These included the beginnings of residential diplomacy,¹ the formation of nation-states with record-keeping bureaucracies, overseas empires with national trading companies, the birth of international insurance companies such as Lloyd's of London, religious conflicts within Christianity as well as between Christianity and Islam, the modernization of warfare, and industrialization. All were of interest to competing major powers.

A classic example of intelligence that influenced the course of history is during the Anglo-Spanish conflict of the 1580s and 1590s when a weaker Elizabethan England stood up against the world power, Spain, under King Phillip II. Elizabeth I had many domestic and foreign enemies but was fortunate to have several clever Secretaries of State, most famous of which was the well-travelled and educated, Sir Francis Walsingham, who established networks of spies in Scotland, France, The Netherlands, Italy, Spain and England.

By placing spies in the Spanish court, Walsingham learned of conspiracies to assassinate the Queen and of Phillip's plans to invade England with the Armada. An especially helpful correspondent-spy was the ambassador from the city-state of Florence, Giovanni Figliuzzi. England's intelligence efforts, though some agents were amateurish, others duplicitous, and the spying was not well-financed, were superior to Spain's. Providence in 1588 took a hand in the fate of the Spanish Armada when a great storm in the English Channel wrecked and scattered the fleet before it could land its invasion force.

Intelligence networks of that time were transitory and rarely survived the monarchs or the terms of their officers. However, intelligence practices were developed that are still used today. One was the availability of "secret funds" for spying, bribery, and propaganda

1. Residential diplomacy was a new practice among both city-states and emerging nation-states in Europe that presented opportunities for more spying. The practice replaced the pre-Renaissance itinerant diplomacy, when ambassadors did not reside for any length of time in the countries to which they were accredited but moved from place to place. At least one Italian city-state introduced residential diplomacy in the 13th century, but the Republic of Venice in the 14th and 15th centuries was a principal pioneer of residential diplomacy. Venetian diplomats submitted regular, detailed reports on their observations abroad. Although ambassadors were not supposed to spy, diplomats' collection of intelligence could include the use of spies. A 17th century Spanish ambassador resident in England remarked that in his day ambassadors were little more than "public spies." Others labeled such diplomats as "honorable spies," who, it was assumed, were all gathering intelligence for their countries.

used by England, France, Austria, and other European states. George Washington, during the revolution and as president, used secret funds provided by Congress. Another was the establishment of special offices or Cabinets noires (“Black Chambers”) to intercept the mail of foreign diplomats and others. Such Black Chambers included experts in cryptanalysis (the reading of secret writing), technicians who could open and restore undetected mail seals, and linguists to translate foreign languages. Beginning as early as the late 16th Century in France, such activities were located in the foreign ministry and in post offices.

Cardinal Richelieu (1586-1642), chief minister of King Louis XIII of France, placed as great an emphasis on spying on his domestic enemies as against foreign powers. Richelieu initiated the practice of keeping police files on the King’s subjects. In the 1639 siege of a Spanish fortress, the French intercepted enemy messages, enabling the deception of the Spanish by sending a falsified message, which ordered the fortress to surrender. It did.

By 1700 the French were reputed to be clever spymasters. It was no coincidence that the English intelligence vocabulary is dominated by words adopted from French, such as reconnaissance, reconnoiter, surveillance, spy and spying. At the end of the century, during the wars of French Revolution, the potent new French word, espionnage, entered English common usage as “espionage.”

Whatever the truth of the notion that the French led in such secret arts (certainly the English writer and secret agent, Daniel Defoe, assumed this to be the case), the spy networks of the French played significant roles in French efforts to surpass its imperial rival, Britain, dominate European politics, and to build an overseas empire.

One of the most bizarre cases of a diplomat carrying out espionage was that of Chevalier Charles d’Eon (1728-1810), French soldier, swordsman, diplomat and spy, who spent half his life as a man and half as a woman. D’Eon carried out important diplomatic missions for King Louis XV of France and was a member of the so-called “King’s Secret,” a clandestine group not known to most of France’s government. Among

d’Eon’s successful diplomatic missions was spying in England as well as in Catherine The Great’s Russia. D’Eon is interesting not only for the question of gender but because after dismissal, he (she?) kept secret documents about a French invasion plan and the secret unit he had been part of and sought to blackmail the king to be reinstated.

The great Prussian monarch, Frederick The Great (1712 – 1786) took great pains to collect intelligence before campaigns and battles. His classic military writings address the methods of employing military spies. His typology of military spies was inspired by hard-won experience, a practical sense and current French spy doctrine. Four types of spies, he observed, were hired to discover enemy secrets: common spies, from the common people

in the specific combat theatre; double spies, where renegades spied for pay; spies of consequence from the “better classes,” and coerced spies, who could include prosperous burghers who spied for Prussia because they had been threatened with loss of property or feared the fate of their families who were hostages. The patriot-spy, who spied because of national loyalty, was not in the typology. Such motivation would not become common until years later with the emergence of nationalism sparked by the American and French revolutions. Frederick once quipped that a commander he had faced in battle was preceded in the field with a hundred cooks while he was preceded by a hundred spies.

By the late 18th Century, as the sun was setting on the French and Spanish empires and rising on the British, intelligence work reflected continuity as well as change. Before invention of the telegraph, signal flags on land and at sea speeded the sending of messages, and diplomats increasingly used secret writing in their correspondence. Code names for spies were adopted and the use of invisible ink, to hide messages in letters became more sophisticated. Private companies, such as Lloyd’s of London and the Rothschild banks, had efficient intelligence-collection systems, which relayed news from abroad sometimes more rapidly than government agencies. For example, news sent by private carrier pigeon of the outcome of important battles in

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the late 18th and early 19th centuries reached private companies in London before the British government.

Intelligence activities during the American Revolutionary War (1775-1783) were significant, but it is difficult to conclude that Washington's intelligence successes provided the margin of victory. The Americans held a natural advantage as locals in knowing the country better than the invaders but the British had more experience in military and naval intelligence and were superior in naval power. The most celebrated American spy of the Revolution was a young teacher and volunteer in the Continental Army, the patriot-spy-martyr, Nathan Hale (1755-1776), who volunteered to spy for General Washington. Left out of textbooks' brief mention of Hale is the fact that Hale's fellow Connecticut soldiers, when they learned that he had volunteered to spy for General Washington, sought to talk him out of the mission, because they considered spying immoral and dishonorable work. Hale justified what he described as a "peculiar service" as being necessary to the patriots' cause, and since no one else had volunteered, he would. Disguised as a Dutch schoolmaster seeking a job, Hale was discovered and executed. Despite his minor clandestine role, Hale is celebrated as a hero and the symbol of selfless patriotism. No fewer than ten statues commemorate Hale's patriotic sacrifice, including one at the CIA and another at Yale University, his alma mater.

An important advantage for the American revolutionary forces was that George Washington himself was the main spymaster and analyst and had a keen appreciation of the importance of secret intelligence. Even though Washington had to pay spies out of his own pocket, his system of espionage was more focused, centralized, and efficient, than that of the British.²

The French, beginning in 1778, used their expertise in deceptive arts to disguise their assistance to the Americans. The French secret agent, Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais (1732-1799), author of *The Marriage of Figaro*, developed a novel method of clandestine assistance to an ally. Organizing what might have been the first dummy or front company, "Rodrigue, Hortalez and Company," Beaumarchais expedited the dispatch of French arms, munitions, and provisions from French ports to the

American rebels.

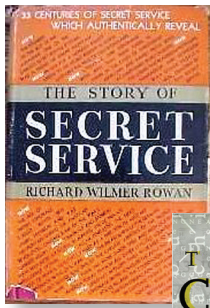
During the French Revolution and its subsequent Terror (1789-1794), the revolutionary Foreign Ministry developed an intelligence organization that presaged those later found in Bolshevik Russia, the Soviet Union, and Nazi Germany. This unit spied, countered foreign spies, carried out mail and press censorship, sabotage, assassinations, and produced disinformation and propaganda, to bolster revolutionary France against both internal and external enemies.

The period of 1500 to 1800 saw intelligence grow in importance in war as well as in peacetime. Military and political espionage became more sophisticated and complex. The diversity of spies increased. Secret messages became more complex and required the employment of mathematicians and linguists. Military manuals discussed the use of spies in warfare. Deception by means of false messages and use of dummy commercial companies for secret assistance foreshadowed intelligence activities in later wars. Intelligence operations by the French after 1789 foreshadowed the aggressive intelligence services of the totalitarian powers in the 20th Century.

READINGS FOR INSTRUCTORS

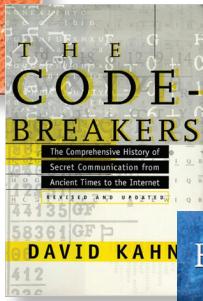
There is no single volume of the intelligence history of the 1500-1800 period but two references are recommended. First is Richard W. Rowan's eccentric, but witty, and fascinating narrative of intelligence history from ancient times (*The Story of Secret Service*, New York: Literary Guild, 1937). It is dated in its analysis,

2. Congress reimbursed Washington \$17,000 after the war for intelligence expenses.

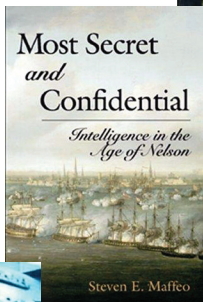
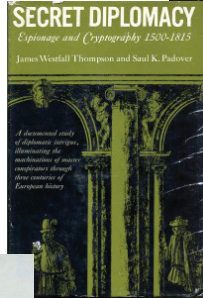
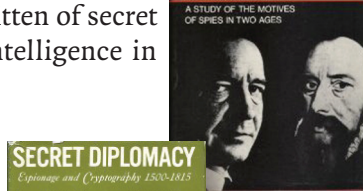


sketchily documented, and lacks an index, but for pre-1800 history it remains unique. A revised edition of this book, with an added index, appeared in 1967, but with some pre-1800 material cut: Richard W. Rowan and Robert G. Deindorvice: thirty-three cen-

fer, *Secret Ser-* vices of espionage (1967). *S e c o n d*, highly recommended, but a door-stopper of a book is David Kahn, *The Code-Breakers: The Story of Secret Writing* (2nd rev. edition, New York: Scribner, 1996). At 1,181 pages it is encyclopedic but quite simply the greatest history ever written of secret writing, cryptology, and intelligence in any language.

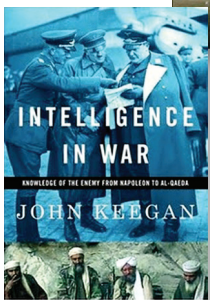


An accessible, concise account of spying during Queen Elizabeth I's reign is in Alan Haynes, *Invisible Power: The Elizabethan Secret Services 1570-1603* (Stroud, UK: Alan Sutton, 1992; 1994 paper ed.). A rare, c o m p a r a t i v e analysis Elizabethan ain was writ-



of spies' motives in and Cold War Brit- ten by Michael Burn, able Land. A Study of Spies in Two Ages (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1970).

Despite its age, the most succinct history of spying and diplomacy from 1500 to 1815 remains James Westfall Thompson and Saul K. Padover's *Secret Diplomacy, Espionage and Cryptography 1500-1815* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1937, 1st ed.; reprinted 1963, 1965.)



The best documented work on British intelligence in the 18th Century, with an emphasis on late 18th

Century naval intelligence, is Steven E. Maffeo's *Most Secret and Confidential: Intelligence in the Age of Nelson* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2000). Also recommended is a work by the distinguished military historian, John Keegan, *Intelligence in War: The Value – and Limitations – Of What the Military Can Learn About the Enemy* (New York: Vintage, 2002; pbk ed. 2004). Recommended for pre-1800 intelligence history and trenchant analysis especially are his Introduction and Chapter One, “Knowledge of the Enemy,” pp. 3-25. 🦅

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New ideas are attacked as absurd; then when admitted to be true, deemed obvious and insignificant; finally they are seen to be so important that adversaries claim they themselves discovered them.

— William James



Intelligence Operations are like Chess, the mistakes are all there, waiting to be made.

— Chessmaster Savielly Grigorievitch Tartakower